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# THE STORY OF THE CHRIST CHILD

*A Devotional Study of the Nativity Stories  
in St. Luke and St. Matthew*

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LEON MORRIS, B.Sc., M.Th., Ph.D.

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## PREFACE

A REVIEWER of *The Story of the Cross* complained that that volume does not drive the reader to contemplate "the mystery" of the Passion. A commentator on another of my works lamented that he did not "hear the music" of the Gospels. So perhaps it may be as well to begin by warning those who would like to contemplate mysteries or hear music that they are not likely to do either in this volume. I am, I fear, rather a matter-of-fact person, not given overmuch to contemplating mysteries or making music. But I have a love for the Greek New Testament, and a conviction that many of its riches can be made available to the non-Greek reader by dint of careful explanation. In this book I have taken the stories about the nativity of our Lord in the First and Third Gospels and tried to put in language which the non-specialist will understand something of what I see as I read those stories in the original. The text of the Authorized Version is printed, for I have taken that as my starting-point, and proceeded to show what light a study of the Greek text can throw on the familiar words.

These studies were originally given as a series of midday addresses in St. Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, leading up to the Christmas season. They were taken down by means of a tape-recorder and then typed out for me. I have worked over the typescript and made a number of alterations. I would like to place on record my gratitude to my friend Mr. John Robinson for providing and operating the tape-recorder, and also to Misses L. Lymburn and J. Hays and Mrs. P. White, who shared the labour of the typing.

As was the case in *The Story of the Cross*, I have for the most part eschewed the discussion of critical questions. The purpose of these studies is not to grapple with all the difficulties



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that these ancient writings raise, but rather, taking them as they stand, to see what they have to say to us today. If they help someone to see a little more clearly what these narratives mean I shall be well content.

I would also like to place on record my debt to the commentaries I have consulted. These have meant very much to me. They are cited, incidentally, simply by mention of the author's name. Wherever I refer to a writer without giving details it should be understood that the passage is in his commentary on the verse I am discussing, unless he is a translator, when it is his translation I am citing.

L. M.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROMISE OF THE FORERUNNER

(Luke 1: 5-25)

THE story of Christmas is the story of the most stupendous happening in the history of the world, for it is the story of God's sending His Son to earth. It is the story of God's action for man's salvation, for Bethlehem leads right on to Calvary. It is the story of that "foolishness of God" which is "wiser than men", of that "weakness of God" that is "stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1: 25). For who amongst men would have ever dreamed that the Son of God would come to earth as the Babe of Bethlehem? It is the story above all stories which brings home the truth that God does things in His own way, and that His way is not the way of men.

In one sense the story can be said to have begun back in a remote antiquity when the Lord God said to the serpent concerning the seed of the woman, "It shall bruise thy head" (Gen. 3: 15). Devout commentators have often pointed out that in these words the work of Christ is foreshadowed. It continues throughout the pages of the Old Testament as holy men of old set forth the way of God in law and psalm and history. It takes in the ancient sacrifices which taught that "without shedding of blood is no remission" (Heb. 9: 22). It may be traced through the writings of the prophets who looked for One that was to come. It is seen in the variety of expressions they use to bring out the significance of the Messiah (the son of David, the Branch, and so on), and to arouse the interest and the expectations of the devout.

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But in the course of time the voice of prophecy fell silent. For hundreds of years there lacked a voice which could cry, "Thus saith the Lord". Not until the very eve of the day when God's Son would come forth was the silence broken. Then in His wisdom God raised up the greatest of the prophets, indeed the greatest of all men (Matt. 11: 11). We take up the story at the point when the coming of this man, whom men were to call John the Baptist, was promised.

### *A Devout Couple* (Luke 1: 5-7)

5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

Luke has written the opening four verses of his Gospel in the elegant, correct style of the classical scholar. It is the kind of language that nobody would use in normal conversation, but it has dignity. It is the writing style of the educated. The evangelist evidently considered it the right kind of language in which to write a short preface. Now that he actually begins his narrative his style changes immediately. It is not quite the style of ordinary people, though it is nearer that than the classics by a long way. It is the style of ordinary people but with a Biblical flavour. The Hebrew Old Testament had been translated into a rather peculiar Greek, a Greek which often reflected Hebrew constructions and was not like any other Greek. It may be that Luke is consciously modelling his style on that of the Old Testament, just as if a man today should deliberately write in a Biblical style. But there is another possibility. In verse 1 he has mentioned others who wrote before him. There is nothing unlikely in the suggestion that he is here using one of these documents, and a very old one at that; Luke had not been present at the



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incidents he is describing and had to draw his information from some source. Many scholars think that he is translating an early Hebrew or Aramaic document, and that he is translating so exactly that his source influences his style. This is rendered all the more probable in that the style is much more Hebraic in the first two chapters than in all the rest of the Gospel. If we can accept this, then the nativity stories are very old, indeed.

Luke begins by dating the events he is about to describe in the reign of Herod, the king of Judæa. There were several Herods, and this one is that Herod who is commonly called the Great, though the title must be regarded as a tribute to his achievements rather than to his character. All in all, he was one of the nastiest types known to us from antiquity. He reigned from 40 B.C. to 4 B.C. In many respects he was an able ruler. He was a great builder and, for example, he rebuilt the temple in magnificent style. This might have given him favour in the eyes of the religious but that he also built temples to heathen deities and subsidized games in their honour. He was also a tyrant of the worst kind. He was cruel, suspicious and vindictive. He was very ready to put to death anyone who opposed him, and even those who might oppose him. It is not surprising that he was thoroughly detested by his subjects. After his death his memory was detested and his name held in dishonour. He stood for all that is evil, so that "in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa" almost means "in the darkest and most evil days that men can remember". It was in such days that God began those events which were to bring the greatest good into the world. It is the way of men to be depressed when they pass through dark days. But even worldly men have noticed that the darkest hour is just before the dawn. And Christians have seen again and again that God has done His mightiest works in the very hour when scoffers have been denying His power or even His very existence, saying, "Where is now Thy God?"

Zacharias was "of the course of Abia" (Moffatt, "the division of Abijah"). This refers to the way the temple

services were ordered. There was only one temple, but there were many priests. In other religions they might exercise their ministry in various places, but for Judæism there was one place only where a priest could discharge his priestly functions, namely in the temple at Jerusalem. Accordingly, so that they might all have as fair a share as possible, the priests were divided into a number of "courses". This word in itself means no more than service for a number of days (as in Neh. 13: 30; A.V., "wards"). From the service rendered it came to denote the people who rendered the service. Thus it came to signify a group of priests (who would do service for a stated period). We read in 1 Chron. 24 of David's dividing the priests into twenty-four courses, each one representing the descendants of one of the "chief men" of the sons of Aaron. This arrangement was carried on by Solomon (2 Chron. 8: 14), and apparently continued. The exile to Babylon disrupted the system, and when the exiles returned not all the priestly courses came back. Indeed Ezra 2: 36 ff. lists only four who did so. However, when orderly worship was set up once more an attempt was made to arrange it in the old way. All the available priests were divided into twenty-four courses, and the courses were given the old names. The names thus lost their significance. Zacharias is said to have been of the course of Abia (or Abijah), but this does not mean that he was descended from Abijah.

His wife was "of the daughters of Aaron". This set the final seal on his priestly respectability. Not only was Zacharias himself a priest but he was married to the daughter of a priest, an arrangement everyone held to be ideal. The name Elisabeth means "My God is an oath". This is a Hebrew way of saying that God is absolutely faithful. He will certainly carry out His promises. Zacharias' name is also significant. It means "The Lord remembers", and is symbolic of God's continual watching over His people. He is never forgetful of their needs. In their names, then, Zacharias reminds us of God's watchfulness over His people, and Elisabeth of His faithfulness. Set against the dark background of "the days of Herod, the king" both are significant.



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Of this couple it is said "they were both righteous before God". With us "righteous" has an ethical meaning, but among the Hebrews the word basically was a legal one. It meant "conforming to the law", and as the law was especially the law of God the word was religious as well as legal. We see this well in this passage, because "righteous" is immediately explained as "walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless". Of course all this is not without its ethical significance. The point I want to make is that it is not the ethics that is primary but the religion. Basically, righteous people were not folk of high ethical standards, but people of deep religious piety. And such were Zacharias and Elisabeth.

The description of them as "blameless" puzzles us when we read elsewhere in the New Testament that nobody is really righteous in the sight of God, and that all men are sinners. But the word does not mean absolutely perfect before God. Paul, who has so much to say about universal sinfulness, and who in Romans writes so movingly about his own inability to do the right he recognized, could yet say that in the days before he was converted he was "blameless" (Phil. 3: 6). He uses exactly the same word as is here applied to Zacharias and Elisabeth. As far as man can he had kept the law. He had not kept it nearly well enough, but this aspect of the matter is not in mind when the word "blameless" is used. Zacharias and Elisabeth, then, were earnest and pious souls. Their religion was not simply formal and outward. They really served God with all their heart. They were as blameless as people well can be in their keeping of His commandments.

Luke completes his introductory sketch of this devoted couple by speaking of their great sorrow. They had no children "because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years". In ancient Judæa natural causes did not enter into men's thinking as with us. Barrenness was interpreted as a mark of divine displeasure. It was a reproach to a woman. It could only mean God's punishing hand, men thought. Elisabeth, who had served God so



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faithfully, must have had a constant feeling of complete frustration. She was earnest and devout. She had done all she could to serve God. She had earned the epithet "blameless". But still the mark of God's displeasure hung over her. As both she and her husband were old there was no prospect of an alteration in the situation. "Well stricken" incidentally has associations of decrepitude and the like in English which the Greek expression it translates has not. It means simply "advanced in their days", i.e. rather old.

### *Zacharias' Priestly Service* (Luke 1: 8-10)

8 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, 9 according to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

Luke now gives us a little glimpse of the kind of work that a priest might be found doing. His service was "before God" for that is the primary application of all priestly endeavour. And it was "in the order of his course", for such service must follow the due order. For most of his lifetime he would necessarily be absent from the temple. But his turn would come. Then he would be able to discharge his priestly function in the great shrine at Jerusalem.

It was the custom in priestly service to allocate duties by casting lots. To Zacharias on this occasion fell the lot of burning incense in the temple (the word means the inner shrine, the holy place; Knox renders "sanctuary"). This solemn act of worship was carried out each morning and each evening. But because there was only one temple and there were many priests, any given priest would not have the opportunity of offering the incense more than once in his lifetime. Indeed many never got the opportunity at all. Particularly for a man like Zacharias, who came from the country, it would represent the high point in all his life. From time to time he would come up to Jerusalem in the

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order of his course to see and play some small part in the worship at the great temple, the heart of Judæism. But just once he had the opportunity of entering into the holy place and there offering the incense which symbolized the prayers of God's people. For a priest this was the supreme moment in life. At one and the same time it was the moment of greatest joy and of deepest solemnity.

While Zacharias offered the incense the people in the congregation prayed in the next court of the temple. The temple consisted of many parts. We might, perhaps, compare it with a cathedral like this. We meet in the place set aside for worship, but this is only one part, albeit the most important part, of the mighty edifice. There are offices, vestries, halls, and all the rest of it. So in the Jerusalem temple there were chambers belonging to the priests, courts where the worshippers assembled, the holy place (into which only the priests might go) and the holy of holies (into which only the High Priest might enter, and he no more than once a year, on the Day of Atonement). Zacharias was offering incense in the holy place, and the congregation was spending the time in prayer in the next court. We have already noted that incense was offered morning and evening, and it does not seem to me that we have any way of knowing which this occasion was (though I notice that some commentators are firmly in favour of one and some just as firmly in favour of the other). If we could establish that more people attended one than the other we might have something of a guide, for we read that "the whole multitude of the people" were there.

### *The Message of the Angel (Luke 1: 11-17)*

11 And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. 14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. 15 For he shall be great in the sight of

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the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. 16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. 17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

At this solemn moment there appeared the angel of the Lord. He was standing on the right of the altar. Sitting or standing at the right hand of a person is in the Scripture a mark of special honour. Perhaps the fact that the angel was on the right of the altar whereon offering was made to God is meant to indicate that the angel was a very honourable being indeed.

When Zacharias saw him he was troubled and afraid. You can imagine it, can't you? Here was the dear man at the supreme moment of his ministerial life. We do not know exactly how old he was, but he was certainly an old man (verse 18). Levites had to retire at sixty years of age, but there was no retiring age for priests, so that he might have been any age. All through his adult life, however long it had been, Zacharias had been looking for this moment. He had probably thought about it for years. He had probably rehearsed every moment, so that he knew exactly what he would do, and when and how he would do it. And now, when he is actually at the moment so carefully prepared for, behold, an angel stands at the right of the altar! Here is something that the aged priest had never reckoned on. Small wonder that he is put out! Why he should also be afraid is not quite clear, though I imagine that any heavenly visitant is likely to inspire fear in the sons of men. It is something quite out of our ordinary experience, something beyond our ken, beyond our comprehension and apprehension. Whether that is the reason or not, that is what happened to Zacharias. Fear fell upon him.

Accordingly the angel's first word was one of reassurance. "Stop being afraid" is the force of his opening words, and then he gives the reason, "thy prayer is heard". This raises



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a small problem for us. What was this prayer of Zacharias? The obvious answer is that it was a prayer for a son, but there are cogent objections to this. First, there is the matter of the age of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Would people of this age have continued to pray that they would have a son? The impression we get is that on account of their age they had given up all hope of a child. Then there is Zacharias' blank refusal to believe the angel when he told him that he would have a son. This does not look like the reaction of a man who has just been informed that his most fervent prayer is to be answered. Of course, we must bear in mind that men are often lacking in faith when they pray. I suppose that every Christian has known the experience of God's rebuking of his tepid faith by answering a prayer that he hardly dared believe would be answered. But Zacharias' doubts seem to go beyond that. After all, he was sent a severe punishment for his unbelief, namely dumbness over a period of months. I find it hard to believe that the old priest had been praying specifically for the gift of a child and that he reacted to an angelic assurance that a child would be given him with such blank unbelief. Again, it would scarcely have been proper for a priest to have made so personal a prayer so central. "Thy prayer" is not further explained, so that it must refer either to Zacharias' prayer at that moment or to his heartfelt, habitual prayer. That he would pray for anything personal at the supremely holy moment of offering incense is difficult to accept. Nor is it much easier to think that at that time of national and religious crisis a priest would be making his personal desire for a son his characteristic prayer. For all these reasons we must reject the idea that the prayer was specifically for the gift of a son.

It is much more likely that Zacharias, in common with many devout souls of his day, had been praying for the redemption of Israel. Deeply pious men were concerned that the people of God should be in subjection to the hated Roman. They remembered the days of old when mighty deeds had been done by their God. They looked for Him to stretch forth His mighty arm once more and smite the

heathen to the uttermost parts of the earth. Some of them looked for a very material kingdom, and some had deeply spiritual expectations. But in one form or another there was a widespread longing that God would send His Messiah. The most probable understanding of the situation then is that Zacharias has been praying for God to send the great Deliverer. The angel assures him that God is about to answer this prayer, and to answer it in a way which would far surpass the old man's expectations and hopes. In passing we might notice the significance of the word used of Zacharias' prayer. The Greek word used in verse 10 of the people's prayer is a word expressive of devotion. But that used of Zacharias' prayer is one expressive of need. Zacharias rightly discerned the signs of the times. Zacharias was aware of the emptiness of the age. Zacharias felt deeply the lack that could be made good only by the sending of the Messiah. He prayed out of his deep sense of need.

The angel proceeds to speak of the son that would be born to Zacharias and Elisabeth. Notice that the angel does not say, "*For thy wife shall bear a son*" (which would indicate that Zacharias' prayer had been for a son), but "*and thy wife shall bear a son*". This points, as Plummer remarks, to an additional blessing that God would give. Not only would He answer the old priest's prayer, but He would give him a son as well. The son's name was to be John, which means "*Jehovah shows grace*". This may be taken in either of two ways. It may mean "*Jehovah is merciful*", that is to say, that it is His characteristic to show mercy. In that case the name is forward-looking, and refers primarily to the way the Lord is about to show mercy on His people in sending them the Messiah. The other way is to understand it as "*the gift of God*", in which case the babe himself is thought of as God's gift. Both are true, and it is not possible to choose between them. Either way the name has about it the thought of God's favour.

The coming of the little one was to be the cause of much rejoicing. The angel speaks of "*joy and gladness*", the second word standing for the expression of the first. It is a "*joyful*"

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utterance of rejoicing" as Geldenhuys puts it. It is the joy that bubbles over and cannot contain itself. Not only would the child's birth be an occasion for rejoicing to his parents, but the angel speaks of many as rejoicing. "At his birth" means not so much on the occasion of his birth as on the basis of that birth. In other words it is not the fact that the old couple would have a child that would give matter for rejoicing (though that, of course, is true). It is the work that the child would accomplish. It is the series of events that were now set in train.

From the parents and others the angel turns to the child. He was to be great not only in the eyes of men, but "in the sight of the Lord". This is true greatness, for it is what a man is before God that he truly is. John's special consecration to the Lord was to be symbolized by his abstinence from all manner of intoxicating drink. From his earliest days he was to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Some have thought that this description indicates that John was a Nazarite (see Numbers 6). The Nazarites are imperfectly understood, but it is clear that they were men set aside for the service of God in a special way, usually for a limited period. One of the marks of their consecration was that the Nazarites abstained from all manner of wine and strong drink. There are certainly points of resemblance to John. But there are also points of difference. Thus a prominent feature of the Nazarite was his long hair. Neither hair nor beard was cut during the time prescribed for the Nazarite vow. There is no mention of that in connection with John either here or elsewhere. The fact that John is never called a Nazarite, and that one important feature of the Nazarite is never mentioned in connection with him, makes it hazardous to infer merely from the mention of strong drink that he belonged to this order.

The most natural way of understanding the situation is that John had a unique position. As the son of a priest it would be anticipated that he would exercise priestly functions. But this was not to be. Nor would he be a Nazarite in the accepted sense. He had a ministry all his own, and



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special marks of his consecration to that ministry were prescribed.

A special mark of his equipment for that ministry is also listed. Right from the womb he was to be filled with the Holy Spirit. John would come to discharge a special task, intimately related to God's supreme purpose for men. This could not be done in any human strength, and thus a special endowment of the Holy Spirit would be given him.

The angel describes briefly the work that John would do. He would turn many of "the children of Israel" to the Lord. In that day, as in all others, there were many who professed to be the people of the Lord, but who were yet far from Him. John's ministry was to turn many of them to God. This noble ministry is further explained as that John was to go "in the spirit and power of Elias". That is to say, he was to exercise a ministry like that of the great prophet Elijah. Probably we are to understand "fathers" not in the sense of "fathers of families" but in the sense of the great forefathers of the race. It is used in this sense often, the fathers being men like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There are passages in the Old Testament which speak of the fathers as being displeased with the conduct of their descendants in the days of the particular prophet who was speaking. Thus Isaiah looks for a time when "Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale. But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands . . ." (Isa. 29: 22 f.). Jacob is pictured as being ashamed of his children, the men of Isaiah's day. Cf. also "Doubtless thou art our father, though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not" (Isa. 63: 16). By contrast Jesus could speak of Abraham rejoicing to see His day (John 8: 56). The angel probably means that the conduct of the Israelites in the days of Zacharias was displeasing to God. They were not trying to carry out the divine commands. Accordingly the fathers, who were, by definition, godly men, would be mightily displeased with them. The ministry of John was to be such that he would change the men of his day. They would be turned back to God. This would mean that the attitude of the

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fathers to them would be changed also. They would be turned to the children. Turning the disobedient "to the wisdom of the just" has a similar meaning. John would turn the disobedient so that they would walk in the wise ways of just men. They would now obey God. "To" in the expression "to the wisdom of the just" is really "in". Turn them so that they come to be "in the wisdom of the just" is the meaning of it. The effect of all this is "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord".

### *Zacharias' Reception of the News (Luke 1: 18-20)*

18 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. 19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. 20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

Now comes Zacharias' reaction to this stupendous news. He was quite unable to take it in. It was just too good to be true. So he explodes in an incredulous question, "Whereby shall I know this?" He points to his old age and that of his wife. When he says "I am an old man" his "I" is emphatic. His condition of life makes the whole thing preposterous.

The response of the angel is a stern one. First he gives his name, and then something of his dignity. Gabriel means "Man of God". The name expresses the angel's dedication to God. Gabriel is one of only two angels who are named in Scripture (the other is Michael, which means "who is like God?"). Further, Gabriel is possessed of a high dignity, for he stands in the presence of God (Knox, "my place is in God's presence"). The implication is that Zacharias ought to believe without further question the word of a being of such excellent dignity. He was nothing more than a mortal (could we say a rather querulous old mortal?), and he had

the impudence to cast doubts on the word of an angel who is known by his own name, and whose place is in the presence of God! Just as Zacharias had drawn attention to himself with an emphatic "I" so now does Gabriel.

Gabriel proceeds to his mission. "Am sent" in the Greek points to a single action in past time, "I was sent". "To shew thee these glad tidings" employs a verb which later became the usual word for "to preach the gospel". Though we could hardly translate it here "to preach this gospel to you" yet the use of this word is very expressive. The message of the angel to Zacharias was a veritable gospel. It was a mark of the divine favour that such a message should be communicated to any mortal. The reaction that would be expected would be one of profound thankfulness and great rejoicing. And Zacharias doubted!

The judgment of the Lord came on this disbelieving soul. "Behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed." Zacharias had asked for a sign ("Whereby shall I know this?") and a sign was given him, but a sign of a very different character from any that he would have desired. It is profitable for us to reflect that the judgment of the Lord is always against those that disbelieve. The blessings of God are such that they are appropriated only by faith. If we disbelieve, then by that fact we cut ourselves off from God's blessing. We shut ourselves up to judgment. The word of the Lord still comes to men, and comes so clearly that they may know that it is God's word to them. To refuse it is to leave open nothing but the judgment of God. That is written into the very constitution of things.

Zacharias' unbelief did not affect the truth of the words spoken. They would certainly be fulfilled. (Moffatt "it will be accomplished, for all that, in due time"). "In their season" makes use of the Greek word *kairos*, a word for which we have no real equivalent. Time in our sense of the term is denoted by another Greek word, *chronos* (from which we get our word "chronology"). This refers to time in its quantitative aspect, time regarded merely as the succession of events.



But *kairos* is time in its qualitative aspect, time with regard to the kind of events taking place in it. One hour of chronological time is always the same in length as another, neither more nor less. But when the poet assures us that "One crowded hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name" we recognize what he means. He refers to the *kairos*, time considered together with the events that take place in it. It is often used of the right moment for a particular event, the suitable opportunity. It is something of this kind that is meant here. The words that the angel has spoken will not lack fulfilment. But they will be fulfilled, not at haphazard, but when God sees that the right time, the opportune moment, the *kairos*, has come.

*The Completion of Zacharias' Ministry* (Luke 1: 21-23)

21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. 23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

While all this was going on in the holy place the people continued in prayer in the outer court. They "marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple" (better "in the shrine" or "holy place"). It was felt that the occupation on which the priest was engaged was hazardous as well as holy. That is to say, it was a very special duty, and it was incumbent on the priest to do it exactly aright. If he did not, if he offended the Lord by something done amiss, or something left undone, then swift punishment might be expected. The people were always anxious that a priest should speedily complete the ministrations and rejoin them. There are references in Rabbinic writings on the events on the Day of Atonement to the necessity for the High Priest to make his prayer short in the holy of holies "lest he put the people in fear" (cf. Lev. 16: 13). It was something like this in the case of Zacharias.

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The people expected that he would not delay unduly, and they marvelled when he did.

When he came out he should have given the benediction. That was his task. He first offered the incense, then came out and blessed the people. But when Zacharias came out the punishment pronounced by Gabriel was already in operation, so that he could not speak. The verb "beckoned" is in a continuous tense, "he kept on beckoning". It must have been very puzzling to the onlookers. But eventually his general demeanour conveyed to the people the truth of the situation. They grasped the point that he had seen a vision.

This section is rounded off with the information that when he had finished the days of his "ministration", he went back to his home. "Ministration" is not a word referring specifically to the task of the priest, like the words in verses 8, 9, but one which refers to service generally. It originally referred to public service that a citizen might render the community at his own expense. Then it came to be used of service in general. In the Bible it is often used of the service of the priests, though sometimes of giving to the poor (2 Cor. 9: 12; Phil. 2: 30). We derive our word "liturgy" from it.

### *The Concealment of Elisabeth (Luke 1: 24, 25)*

24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, 25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

Why did Elisabeth hide herself for five months? Not out of a desire to hide her pregnancy from those who had mocked her as barren, for the months that she hid herself would be precisely those in which her pregnancy would not be noticeable. It is more likely that her retirement arose from the wonder of the news that Zacharias had made known to her. Not only was God about to give her that child that she had quite despaired of having, but the child was to have a special

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niche in history. He was to be the forerunner of the Messiah. This was all so very wonderful and so very unexpected that Elisabeth wanted to be quiet to think about it all, to pray, to thank God for His mercy. She had previously felt frustrated and humiliated. Now she could say, "This is what the Lord has done for me, now that he has deigned to remove the disgrace I have endured" (Goodspeed).

Throughout this passage two thoughts run, I think. The one is that God answers prayer, but He does it in His own way. Zacharias clearly had not anticipated that the prayer that had meant so much to him would be answered in the way it was. It is a lesson that all God's people must learn, that God answers prayer sometimes in surprising ways. There must always be a heartfelt "Thy will be done" back of what we pray. And, though it is sometimes unexpected, God's answer is always grander than anything we had anticipated. The man who perseveres in prayer has cause for continual thanksgiving and for never-ceasing wonder as the marvels of God unfold before his astonished gaze.

The other is the thought of God's overruling providence. It had been four hundred years since a prophet appeared, and to the men of the day it might well have seemed that God had forgotten to be gracious. The Roman Emperor was supreme. His might went unchallenged. Throughout the world men bowed under Roman domination. Mockers said that God either could not or would not visit His people. Yet the men of that day were on the threshold of seeing the mightiest of all God's mighty acts. He had before sent prophets, but never before had He sent His son. Four hundred years is a long time. It is quite long enough for men to begin to think "God will never again do such mighty things as He did in days gone by". And whenever men begin to think like that they are wrong. God is not a God of the past, but the greatest of present realities, and this truth is enshrined in the story of Zacharias, his dumbness and his subsequent recovery of speech. Well may W. Manson ask, "Is there any suggestion here that the coming



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of John first silenced and then awoke to blessing and praise those saints in Israel who said that the Lord no longer visited his people by messenger or prophet?"

To the eye of man there was nothing about this particular year that distinguished it from any of the other of the four hundred. But when God was ready the forerunner came. When God was ready the Messiah came. Nothing interferes with the steady working out of His purposes. We in this post-sputnik era may well take this to our hearts. It is easy enough to be caught up with the mighty forces that clash in our world, and to think that victory of necessity goes to the big battalions.

But might is never right. And God has never forgotten to be gracious. He works His purposes out in His own way and in His own time. He does not concern Himself with whether this is the way or the time that men expect. This passage of Scripture is a perpetual reminder that God does work His purposes out. And He will do it to the end of time.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE PROMISE OF THE CHRIST

(Luke 1: 26-38; Matt. 1: 18-23)

#### *The Angel Visitor* (Luke 1: 26-28)

26 And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, 27 To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

THE note of time, "in the sixth month", links this with the foregoing narrative. The sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy is meant (cf. the reference to "five months" in verse 24 and to "the sixth month with her" in verse 36). Once more the angel Gabriel is the messenger of the Lord. In verse 19 he is described as "Gabriel, that stands in the presence of God". Here we read, "the angel Gabriel was sent from God". Gabriel does not simply "stand" but he "is sent". The divine activity is a little more stressed here than in the earlier passage. The activity of God is specially noteworthy in all that has to do with the sending of the Son to earth.

Gabriel was sent to "a city of Galilee". Greek has no word for a town, as opposed to a city or a village (though the word for "village" is sometimes translated "town"), with the result that "city" is used rather more freely than we would otherwise have expected. When Nazareth is described as a "city" we must not think of a bustling metropolis. It was quite a small place. But it was more than a hamlet,

which is perhaps why "city" rather than "village" is used. "Galilee" means a "circle" or a "circuit", and from ancient times was the name of this particular district. We are familiar with the name of the town as "Nazareth", but other forms are found, "Nazaret", "Nazarath", and "Nazara". Certainty is unattainable, but the probability is that the name should be read as "Nazaret", that being the best attested reading in the most ancient manuscripts.

Gabriel was sent to a maiden "espoused to a man whose name was Joseph". "Espoused" is what we should call "engaged" rather than "married" (R.V. renders "betrothed"). Yet for people in first-century Palestine an engagement meant far more than it does with us. We understand an engagement as pointing forward to marriage, but it is comparatively easy for it to be broken. Not so in those days. Then an engagement was to all intents and purposes a marriage which had not yet been consummated. It usually lasted a year. During the engagement the property of the betrothed damsel was vested in her husband-to-be. Unfaithfulness was punished exactly like adultery. If anyone wished to break the engagement the same procedure was necessary as for divorce after marriage. The tie was a very close one indeed.

The name of the man is given as "Joseph". It is not clear whether "of the house of David" applies to the virgin or to the man. We could read the verse as referring to a virgin who was espoused to a man, and who also was of the house of David. Or we could read it of a man whose name was Joseph and who was of the house of David. Nothing very much hinges on this, for Mary's descent from this house is shown from verses 32, 69, and that of Joseph from the genealogy in Matthew 1. One or two small points in the Greek make it a little more likely that the reference here is to Joseph. For example, the next clause, "and the virgin's name was Mary", would probably be, "and her name was Mary" if "of the house of David" referred to the maiden. Mary incidentally is the same name as that rendered "Miriam" in the Old Testament.



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The angel came in, evidently into the house where Mary was. "Hail" sounds a little strange to us, but it was the ordinary way in which people greeted one another, just as we say "good morning". (Goodspeed actually translates, "Good morning.") "Thou art highly favoured" renders one Greek word, which is from the same root as the preceding "Hail", so that there is something of a play on words here, though one which is impossible to reproduce in English. The word is an important one owing to the way in which our Roman Catholic friends understand it. They render it "full of grace" (so Knox, for example). Usually they understand this to mean that Mary is the source of grace to men. Thus they often pray "Hail Mary, full of grace . . .", the implication being that Mary has grace she may bestow. The Greek term gives no countenance to such views. "O favoured one", as Moffatt translates, gives the sense of it. The word points to the favour that God has bestowed on Mary, and not to anything that Mary may bestow on others. The angel begins his message with a greeting stressing the honour that God is according to Mary. This is strengthened with the following "the Lord is with thee". The mark of the high favour in which Mary stands is the special presence of God which is accorded to her.

Our Bible goes on "blessed art thou among women", but this should probably be omitted. The words are not found in the most ancient manuscripts at this point. They are found in verse 42. Probably some scribe thought that they fitted in well at this point also, so inserted them. But they seem clearly to be no part of the true text here.

### *The Christ who was to be Born (Luke 1: 29-33)*

29 And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. 30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. 31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. 32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God

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shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Mary's reaction to this opening is interesting. She was "troubled". In verse 12 we read of Zacharias being troubled when he saw the angel, but the word used here is stronger than that in the earlier verse. Mary was more disturbed than was Zacharias. Possibly this was due to the fact that she was so young. Perhaps she felt a little out of her depth in the situation. That she was a woman, and therefore would have led a more secluded life than a man, may well have added to her sense of bewilderment. The particular thing that troubled her, interestingly, is not the presence of the angel, as was the case with Zacharias, but his words. She was troubled "at his saying". She "cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be". Though Gabriel has said nothing to identify himself Mary evidently recognized him as a heavenly visitant. That such a being should greet her as "highly favoured", and assure her of God's presence with her, was more than surprising to her. This shows us something of Mary's deep and genuine humility. She could think of no reason why she should be specially favoured of God, and the statement that this was so, made by one whose authority she could not doubt, troubled her modest soul.

As he had done earlier with Zacharias, Gabriel proceeded to reassure her, using the same words "Fear not". He went on to repeat that she was in high favour. "To find favour" is a Semitic form of speech (though familiarity with it in the Bible has practically made it an English form, too), meaning "to be the recipient of favour". God was pleased to show favour towards Mary.

"And behold" (we should say "Look!") is a way of drawing attention to something important and rather unexpected. In this case it is very unexpected, being, in fact, something that no one would ever have guessed. The exciting news is that Mary is to conceive and bear a son. The

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name of the child is given, namely, "Jesus". This name is the Greek form of the Hebrew "Joshua", a shortened form of "Jehoshua", which means, "God is salvation". Thus we may say that the name expressed the work of Jesus, for He came to be our Saviour.

"He shall be great," said the angel. While he does not elaborate this we may profitably reflect on the fact that God does not count greatness in the same way as do men. "The kings of the Gentiles" may, as Jesus said, "exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors". "But," He added, "ye shall not be so." He went on to explain, "he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve". He proceeded to point to His own example, "For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth" (Luke 22: 25-27). Jesus lived as a poor man, despised and rejected by many, unknown to all save a comparatively small circle. But He was the greatest of all mankind, for true greatness is not to be measured in the way men commonly estimate it.

He was to be called "the son of the Highest". More literally we might render this as "Son of Highest", for the Greek has no articles. In that language there is no need for an article with "Highest", for there is and can be only one "Highest". In the case of "Son" it is slightly different. Here the point is that the emphasis goes on His character as "Son of Highest", rather than on His personality as "the Son". There is truth in both ways of putting it, but the form used here stresses that Jesus is by nature Son (and not creature, as we are).

His dignity is further brought out with reference to His royal splendour. God would give Him "the throne of his father David". This last expression points to Mary's descent from the Davidic line. The angel is dealing with the birth from Mary, and not with the legal paternity, which was all that Joseph could claim. In this connection there is no point in referring to "his father David" unless He is descended



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from David through Mary. The throne is the symbol of royal authority and dignity. This is a reference to the Messianic destiny of Jesus, for the Messiah was to be ruler of the Davidic line. We see this in the Old Testament, while Jewish documents of this period, like the so-called *Psalms of Solomon*, show that the idea was widely held among the people.

In the upshot Jesus was to follow a path that was not to be expected, a path that led to the cross. His greatness led to His crucifixion. But despite that it is true that He followed no mean path. Gabriel is looking through all the humiliation and suffering and rejection and seeing the true glory that was Christ's. Nor would this come to Him fortuitously, or through His own effort. The angel insists that the royalty of Jesus was something that God the Father would give Him.

In verse 33 this royalty is closely associated with "the house of Jacob". This does not confine Christ's rule to this house, but it is a way of referring once more to His Messianic dignity. His world mission is not at the moment in view (or in doubt). It is His Messianic dignity that Gabriel is describing, and in accordance with many Old Testament prophecies he expresses it in terms of sovereignty over Israel. Perhaps we should notice that the word "kingdom" needs to be carefully understood. With us the term is static. It denotes a particular piece of country ruled over by a king (or a queen, as in our case). All in that land belong to that kingdom automatically. But the Greek word is dynamic. It points to something that happens, rather than to something that merely exists. It is rather like our "rule". It is exercised. So Gabriel pictures Jesus as exercising dominion. In this verse he twice makes the point that His kingdom is eternal. Other kingdoms in due course will come to an end. But His is a kingdom which will never be destroyed. It will be "for ever". It will have "no end".

The rule or reign is for the ever and ends (1 Co 15<sup>25</sup>).  
Yet of the kingdom there is no consummation (1 Co 15<sup>24</sup>)

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### *"Conceived of the Holy Ghost"* (Luke 1: 34-38)

34 Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? 35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. 36 And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. 37 For with God nothing shall be impossible. 38 And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

Mary's response is one of puzzlement, not of doubt. Zacharias had doubted that Gabriel's words would be fulfilled. Mary did not query the truth of the angel's statement, but she inquired as to *how* it was to be fulfilled. "Know" means "know sexually" (as regularly in the Old Testament), and Mary apparently took the angel's statement to mean that nothing more was needed on the physical side. She had had no sexual relations, but she would be the mother of the Messiah. How could this be?

Some have understood her words to point to perpetual virginity. They suggest that there would be no difficulty otherwise, for Mary could have subsequently had the necessary relationship. However, this does seem to be reading a lot into the expression. "I know not" does not mean "I will never know". The Greek words point to a present fact, and not to a future intention. There is also the difficulty of seeing why Mary, if she intended perpetual virginity, ever planned marriage. There are other indications in the narrative which seem to show that in due course Mary entered into a normal marriage relationship, and we shall notice them as we come to them. There is also the fact that expressions like "the brethren of the Lord" occur a number of times. The natural explanation of Mark 6: 3, for example, is that Mary subsequently had children in the usual way. Her words here then seem to spring from a conviction that Gabriel meant that she would have a child without anything

further being done on the human level. As she was no more than engaged she was deeply puzzled. Plummer says, "The words are the avowal of a maiden conscious of her own purity; and they are drawn from her by the strange declaration that she is to have a son before she is married."

With a beautiful and reverent reserve Gabriel describes what would happen. There is no article with "Holy Ghost", so that the meaning is "One who is no less than Holy Ghost". Gabriel makes it clear that what is to happen is not something on the ordinary level. It is a divine action to which he is referring. The Holy Spirit would "come upon" Mary. He would "overshadow" her. This last verb is that used in the narrative of the Transfiguration of the cloud that "overshadowed" the disciples. Rieu translates here "the Power of the Most High will draw its shadow over you". There is a marked delicacy about the whole description, but the angel's meaning is clear. Mary would have a child without the intervention of any human father. This is not explicable on human premises, but is something which is due to the working of the Holy Spirit. Notice that this goes beyond anything that is said of John. The birth of the latter involved the power of God, but it was yet a natural birth of human parents, as were similar births like those of Isaac and Samson. But the birth of Jesus, as Godet says, "has the character of a creative act". It represents something completely new.

The next part of the verse should probably be read in the translation of the Revised Version rather than the Authorized. It is rather, "that which is to be born shall be called holy, the Son of God", than, "that holy thing which shall be born of thee . . ." The Greek is not very easy, but it seems to point to the rendering of the Revised Version. Notice that the child is referred to as "holy". This probably means that Jesus would be born free of original sin. The Scripture speaks of all men as being sinners. It refers to their acts of sin, and to the fact that they are sinners by nature. It is this last fact to which the term "original sin" refers. It brings out the point that it is our nature to sin. We sin



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naturally. But there was no sin about Jesus. From the time of His birth He was "holy", completely consecrated to the service of God, and with no admixture of evil in any shape or form. It behoved Him who was to deliver the race from sin, Himself to be without sin of any kind.

He is further spoken of as "the son of God". As in verse 32 the expression has no article: He is one whose nature it is to be Son of God. We must notice that this is said in connection with the special action of the Holy Spirit in bringing about the birth of the child. Some have argued from the fact that now and then in the Old Testament men are spoken of as "sons of God" (e.g. 1 Chron. 22: 10) that when Jesus is called "the Son of God" it means no more than that He walks in the ways of God. This verse shows that this is not the case. His divine Sonship arises not from His ethical conduct but from the fact that the Holy Spirit brings about His birth. It is His nature and not His deeds which qualifies Him for this title.

This verse brings before us the reality of the incarnation. If He were to be our Redeemer it was necessary that He should take upon Him our flesh. He must be one with us. So it is that the angel speaks plainly of Him as being born as man. But if He were to be our Redeemer it was also plainly necessary that He be more than merely a man. Gabriel's words show that He was to be divine as well as human.

The angel proceeds to show that God does things that men deem impossible. "And behold" ("Look!") as in verse 31 draws attention to something very important and very unexpected. Elisabeth is referred to as Mary's "relation" (the word is wider than "cousin" as the Authorized Version reads, though that they were actually cousins is likely). Some have thought that this throws doubt on the Davidic descent of Mary as Elisabeth has been described as "of the daughters of Aaron". But this objection is groundless. There was no rule compelling people to marry within the boundaries of their own particular tribe. If Mary's father, being of the house of David, had married a lady of the tribe

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of Levi, then all the conditions are satisfied. Mary would then be related to Elisabeth on her mother's side.

Not only was a son promised to Elisabeth. "This," said the angel, "is the sixth month with her, who was called barren." She had actually conceived, though men habitually referred to her as "barren". God had strikingly manifested His power with Elisabeth, and Mary might well draw comfort and assurance from this fact. Nothing is beyond the power of God.

There is a slight uncertainty as to the exact meaning of the words in which this last thought is expressed. Verse 37 might be rendered as the Authorized Version, or it might mean "no word from God shall be void of power" as the Revised Version. The critical word is that rendered "shall be impossible" in the Authorized Version and "shall be void of power" in the Revised. In the classics it means "to be weak" or "powerless", which is the justification for the translation of the Revised Version. But in Greek works other than the classics it has the meaning "to be impossible". This, for example, in its meaning in the Greek Old Testament. This is also its meaning in the only other place where it occurs in the New Testament, namely Matt. 17: 20, where Jesus says that to those who have faith "nothing shall be impossible". In view of this example, and of the general sense of the passage with which we are dealing, I think that the Authorized Version is a little more likely to be correct. Either way, Gabriel is affirming the power of God to do what He chooses irrespective of whether this seems possible to men or not.

This section of the narrative concludes with Mary's quiet and trustful acceptance of God's will for her. "Handmaid" is the word for "slave". It represents Mary's complete submission to the will of God. This is brought out explicitly when she says "be it unto me according to thy word". Moffatt translates, "I am here to serve the Lord. Let it be as you have said." It is easy to assume that this is the natural thing for Mary to say. Unthinkingly we may take it as a more or less automatic response. But this is to miss the very real

danger in which she stood. Her response was one of high courage. Everybody knew that she was betrothed and no more than betrothed to Joseph. When it became known that she was pregnant she was liable to be punished with severity, she might even be put to death, for that penalty was prescribed in Deut. 22: 13-21, 23 f. for the violation of an engagement. She could not expect Joseph to believe her story of the visit of an angel, so that her situation was far from easy or even safe. But clearly Mary trusted that God, who had done all this for her, would see her through what remained. Her utterance is one of faith and trust.

*Joseph's Discovery* (Matt. 1: 18, 19)

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

We consider now how some of these events appeared to Joseph, and for this we turn to the account given in the opening of St. Matthew's Gospel. After giving the genealogy of our Lord the evangelist begins his narrative proper with Joseph's attitude to Mary when he discovered that she was pregnant. "Birth" incidentally in this verse is the same Greek word as that rendered "generation" in verse 1. Properly it does not signify "birth", but "source" or "origin" (though it could come to mean "birth" as it does in Luke 1: 14). Here it is probably not meant to be precise, but is used in the sense of "origin".

The word "espoused" is that which we have discussed in the Lukan account. It refers to an engagement to marry, but a more binding engagement than with us. So close was the tie that in verse 20 Mary could be spoken of already as "Mary thy wife". Matthew tells us that Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy "before they came together", i.e. "came together in marriage". How long before we have no means



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of knowing, but presumably this was some months after the events we have dealt with above. Notice that Matthew speaks of Mary being "with child of the Holy Ghost". This is in impressive agreement with Luke's account. It is not the way that evangelist expressed it, but it amounts to the same thing. Mary's pregnancy was the result of the intervention of the Holy Spirit of God.

Joseph's reaction to his discovery was to plan a quiet divorce. He is spoken of as "a just man". He was fair to Mary. There was nothing in her previous history to give him cause for disquiet. Yet they had not come together and she was with child. What else could he think than that she had been unfaithful? But he was a fair man, and he gave her as much of the benefit of the doubt as he could. He determined to do things without publicity. Some men of his day in divorcing their wives made public examples of them (and by implication declared their own rectitude). Not so Joseph. He had no desire that the reason for the divorce should have any more publicity than was necessary. "To put her away privily" means to give her the document known as "a bill of divorcement" (Mark 10: 4) but to word it so that it stated the fact but not the reason. Mary would be divorced, but Joseph would not blazon abroad his reason for the action. The verb "was minded" is in the aorist tense, which means that Joseph's mind was made up. He was not just thinking the matter over. He had decided on his course of action.

### *The Angel Message (Matt. 1: 20, 21)*

20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. 21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Some have objected to the whole idea of an angel visit to Joseph as well as one to Mary, and have suggested that one

or other must be rejected. But this, I think, is to regard the matter without any feeling for the historical situation. What was happening to Mary was of such an unusual character that it is obvious that she needed authentic information about it. Such could not come second hand. But when she heard Gabriel's message would she tell Joseph? It seems unlikely. The indications are that she was a somewhat reticent maiden. At later times she more than once kept the knowledge of unusual events "in her heart" (Luke 2: 19, 51).

She was not the type to talk wildly or widely. The angel's message was certainly not of such a kind as to induce talkativeness in such a young woman. This virginal conception would have been just the kind of thing that she would have felt diffident about discussing with Joseph.

And if she had told him, could he have believed her? What would any man think when he found his fiancée in such a condition?

Our best understanding of the situation is that Mary trusted God to work out the situation in the way He deemed best. That seems to be implied in her trustful acceptance of Gabriel's message which we have already noted in Luke 1: 38. God's response to her faith is given here. He sent an angel to Joseph to proclaim the startling news to him. The angel's name is not given. He came to Joseph in a dream, and not in the waking state as was the case with Mary. Why there should be this difference is not explained.

"While he thought on these things" is another aorist, and the meaning probably is "when he had thought on these things". The angel did not come until after Joseph had given the matter thought, and had determined his line of action. We are probably right in thinking that there was no need for the angelic message until this stage was reached. But when the time came, immediately God intervened. The angel greeted Joseph as one of David's line ("son" in ancient documents frequently means "descendant", so that "son of David" signifies "descendant from David"). He proceeded, "Fear not". It is interesting to see that this had been said to Zacharias and to Mary, and was later said to the

shepherds. The angels were all considerate of the fears of mortals, and sought to reassure them.

Richard Glover has a very apposite comment on this verse. He reminds us of the words "unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness" (Ps. 112: 4), and points out how relevant they are to this situation. Joseph was a just man. He did not know all the facts, but he acted according to his best lights. Then at the critical moment the Lord gave him the guidance he needed and enabled him to do the right thing. This must be a source of great comfort to us. Often, like Joseph, we are in perplexity as we go about our daily life. We reach a place where we cannot explain the situation in which we find ourselves. The facts seem to go against our best certainties. The thing to do on such occasions is quietly to act according to the light we have, and to look to God to send further light as He sees best. If we take that one step that is clear before us we prove, as Joseph did, that "unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness".

The angel further explains the reason why Joseph should not fear to take Mary. "That which is conceived (or 'begotten'; the verb is usually used of the action of the male parent, though in verse 16 it is used of Mary) in her is of the Holy Ghost." Only this explanation could account for Mary's condition and preserve her honour. We have already seen how this fits in with what Luke says on the matter.

The angel informs Joseph that Mary's child will be a son and that he is to call Him Jesus. Notice that "thou" is singular; Joseph is himself to name the child, which is a way of showing his approval of all that was done. (Luke 1: 31 speaks of Mary as calling Him Jesus. Both were to name Him.) We saw earlier that this name signifies "God is salvation", and points to Jesus' mission as Saviour. Here the reason for the name is given: "for he shall save his people from their sins". This is something that our generation still needs to learn. We are not very interested in saving men from their sins. With our welfare states we are very interested in saving them from want and insecurity. With our international conferences and the like we hope to save them



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from war. We give all support to our medical personnel in their efforts to save men from sickness. But our generation does not bother about sin. What does it matter?

It matters so greatly that when the Son of God came His mission was simply—to save men from their sins. His very name indicates the central purpose that was before Him.

### *Prophecy (Matt. 1: 22, 23)*

22 Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, 23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

Now comes something which is very characteristic of the first Gospel, a reference to the fulfilment of prophecy. Matthew was clearly more than a little interested in the way in which the life and ministry of Jesus were foreshadowed in the ancient Scriptures. So here, right at the beginning, he shows that the birth of Christ is in accordance with prophecy.

The particular prophecy in mind is Isa. 7: 14. A good deal of controversy has raged about this passage, but the facts are these. The Hebrew word which is translated “virgin” is not the usual word for “virgin”. It seems to mean “a young woman of marriageable age” (the root has the meaning of ripeness). However, when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek this word was rendered by a Greek word which unquestionably means a virgin. It is this Greek translation from which Matthew is quoting. The birth of the Saviour was in accordance with the Scripture that Matthew knew. However, he probably means the emphasis to be on the second part of the prophecy, “and they shall call his name Emmanuel”. This last is a Hebrew word meaning “God with us”, and the name points to the very presence of God. Thus did Matthew present the great truth that the Babe who was to be born would be God as well as man. His quotation from Scripture is to underline the fact of the incarnation.

## THE STORY OF THE CHRIST CHILD

In conclusion let us notice that a profound and most important truth is enshrined in these narratives of the Virgin Birth (or to be more accurate, the Virgin Conception; there was nothing unusual about the actual birth of Jesus as far as we know). There are some today who suggest that the Virgin Birth is one doctrine that the Christian Church could well do without. They suggest that it would be more in keeping with God's usual way of doing things that when He sent His son He should send Him to be born in the same way as all others are, with natural human parents. To that I think we must retort that we are not in a position to say what God should or should not do. We ought rather to take the humbler position of seeing what in fact He has done. Here we have two accounts, as different from each other as they well could be without contradicting one another, which bear impressive testimony to God's having done a new thing in the sending of His Son. Had Christ been born of human parents it is difficult to see how He could have been anything other than another human being. The great truth that is preserved in the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is that in the coming of Christ we see something completely new. Jesus Christ is not to be explained in purely human categories. He was a man, but He was more. He owed His earthly origin to the action of the Holy Spirit. With His coming there entered into humanity something that humanity had never experienced before. God became man for man's salvation. We can never fully comprehend all that this means. But we can bow in adoring wonder at God's great act for our salvation.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SONG OF MARY

(Luke 1: 39-56)

WE come now to consider the first of the great hymns that Luke has recorded. Luke was a Greek of culture, and it is not surprising accordingly that he it is, of the four evangelists, who took an interest in the poetry of the early church. Subsequent generations owe him a debt of gratitude, for he has preserved for us those beautiful songs which we know by their opening words in the Latin translation, the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*. When we reflect on what these have meant to Christian devotion throughout the centuries we may well be thankful for Luke's interest in poetry.

*Mary's Visit to Elisabeth* (Luke 1: 39, 40)

39 And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; 40 And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth.

Though Mary was a quiet reflective person, she was also apparently one who could act with decision. When the angel left her she thought about his message and remembered what he had said about Elisabeth. She determined to visit her kinswoman. That she wasted no time is evident from the time notes in the narrative. When Gabriel spoke he was able to tell Mary that "this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren" (verse 36). Mary's visit lasted about three months (verse 56), and her return is narrated before



the birth of Elisabeth's son (verse 57). Mary must have made up her mind and set out on her journey very soon after the angel's visit. At the same time "in those days" reminds us that such a journey would hardly have been made immediately. Preparations would be required (for the journey took several days). Moreover a young woman could scarcely have travelled alone. Mary would have had to find someone to escort her. A few days must have elapsed before her departure.

Of Mary's destination we know little. "The hill country" is a general expression denoting the hilly part of Judæa as opposed to the plain. Some attempts have been made to show that a particular locality was called by this name, but I do not think they have been successful. Similarly, "a city of Juda" might be any one of a large number of places. As we saw in an earlier study, "city" does not necessarily denote a very large place. Owing to the lack of a word corresponding to our "town" the Greeks used "city" for a much wider range of centres of population than we do. Zacharias and Elisabeth may have had their home in a comparatively small place.

Our translation says that Mary went "with haste". The noun is a very difficult one to translate. It combines the ideas of speed and diligence. The person who acts in this way does not delay. He makes up his mind and goes right ahead. The idea of shilly-shallying is quite excluded. But it means more than speedily. Sometimes people do things quickly but shoddily. The word excludes this, too. It denotes serious as well as speedy effort. Perhaps our word "eagerness" gets somewhere near it, though even that is not quite it. Our translators sometimes render the word by "haste" and sometimes by "diligence". However they translate it, I think both ideas are present. The picture we get then is of Mary acting eagerly on the word of the angel. She went promptly and with serious purpose to meet her kinswoman.

Mary came to the place where Zacharias and Elisabeth lived, and entered the house. "Saluted" does not denote

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anything formal as we might think from modern usage. It is the usual form of greeting that is meant.

### *Elisabeth's Prophecy* (Luke 1: 41-45)

41 And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: 42 And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. 43 And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. 45 And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

As Mary came in and greeted Elisabeth the babe leapt in the latter's womb. Movements of a babe during pregnancy are, of course, not uncommon. But on this occasion Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she recognized that the movement was no ordinary one. By virtue of the Spirit's leading she was able to interpret it as showing that she who had just come in was to be the mother of the Messiah. "Spake out with a loud voice" hardly does justice to the Greek. Elisabeth "uttered a loud cry" (Rieu). The impression that we get is that she was greatly excited, and her excitement issued in a sudden great cry.

Then her excitement and inspiration overflowed in the little song that follows. The words are printed to look just like prose in our English Bibles, but they are poetry for all that. Among the Hebrews poetry was somewhat different from that to which we are accustomed. With us poetry is associated with rhyme and metre and that sort of thing, even though we recognize that there are some modern poets who do away with the traditional forms. But Hebrew poetry rarely has rhyme or metre as we understand them. There is rhythm, but that is not quite the same. The really characteristic thing about Hebrew poetry is the way the thought is brought out. Its favourite device is parallelism. This is the process whereby a thought is given in the first

part of a verse, and then repeated in a different way in the second part. There are variations. The second part of the verse may give the opposite of the first part. Or there may be a threefold division. There is no point in our going into all the possibilities. I simply wish to point out that poetry among the Hebrews took a different shape than with us, and that Elisabeth's utterance is not in prose at all but in clearly recognizable poetry. Just as is the case with others in these opening chapters of the Third Gospel, the presence of the Holy Spirit within her led her to clothe her thoughts in the language of the poets.

First let us notice Elisabeth's deep humility. "Blessed art thou among women," she said, and these words mean "You are the most blessed of women". Languages like Hebrew and Aramaic have no degrees of comparison of the adjective, so that it is not easy to say things like "better", "best", or the like. One favourite device is to use "among". If one thing is good "among" others, then it is better than the others. So when Elisabeth says that Mary is "blessed . . . among women" the meaning is that she is "the most blessed of women". This tribute is all the more noteworthy in view of Elisabeth's knowledge of the high place that God had assigned her. She was to be the mother of the Messiah's forerunner. There can be not the slightest doubt that she was very thrilled and very delighted at this knowledge. It would not have been surprising if she had been rather proud of her own position and slow to recognize that of Mary. But when Mary came in there was no envy of her superior place. Elisabeth shows no trace of ill feeling of any kind. Her song is an outburst of pure joy as she recognizes that God has blessed Mary in a way greater than He has blessed her or any other woman. There is a note of deep humility running right through her song.

First, then, she recognizes the supreme place among women that is assigned to Mary. Perhaps we should note in passing that it is possible to translate "Blessed may you be among women". But there is little in favour of this. It is more natural to take it as a statement, as our translation



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does. Then Elisabeth proceeds, "and blessed is the fruit of thy womb". This way of referring to our Lord reminds us of His true manhood. He was the Son of God, but also, when He walked this earth, He was truly man, with all that means in terms of human limitations, human strivings and all the rest of our existence. Right through the New Testament these two thoughts about the Lord Jesus are inextricably intertwined.

From Mary and her Son Elisabeth's attention moves to herself. Once again her humility appears. "Whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" means "What have I done to merit so great a favour?" Elisabeth recognizes the greatness of the Messiah, and appreciates accordingly the visit that is being paid her by the mother of that great One. But she cannot see any reason for such a high honour being paid to her. She recognizes God's signal favour to her, and is thankful for it.

The "For" which begins verse 44 is important. Elisabeth had known her kinswoman for years, and relations between them were such that Mary could come on a fairly prolonged visit without notice. Normally Elisabeth would not see anything surprising in such a visit, nor regard it as a mark of special favour. "For" introduces the reason for her attitude on this occasion. It was because the babe in her womb "leaped . . . for joy" that she, under the leading of the Spirit, recognized the presence of Messiah's mother. The word rendered "joy" is not the usual one, but one expressing something like "exultation". Altogether the movement of the babe in Elisabeth's womb was far from usual. The Holy Spirit within her interpreted this movement. It showed that she who had just come in was to be the mother of the Lord for whom Elisabeth's child was to be the forerunner.

There is a slight ambiguity attaching to the words of verse 45. They might be taken as "blessed is she that believed *that* there shall be a performing . . .", or, as the Authorized Version, "blessed is she that believed: *for* there shall be . . ." The Greek could signify either the content of Mary's belief or the reason for pronouncing her blessed. It seems to me that the

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Authorized Version is likely to be correct. Elisabeth is saying that Mary, who believed, is blessed. It is her faith in general that is meant, rather than some specific act of belief. Then Elisabeth adds that there will be a "performance" (the word might be rendered "consummation": it signifies the climax, the complete fulfilment) of what has been said. Notice that she does not regard the words as originating with Gabriel. She recognized that they come "from the Lord". Rieu somewhat strangely applies the words to Elisabeth, translating "I too was happy in the trust I felt . . ." The Greek employs the third person, and there seems no reason for Elisabeth to refer to herself in this curious way. Knox, by contrast, has "Blessed art thou for thy believing".

### THE MAGNIFICAT

We come now to Mary's song. Perhaps we should notice that there are some people (e.g. Creed) who think that the song is not Mary's at all, but Elisabeth's. They rest this conviction on the fact that there are one or two ancient manuscripts which read "Elisabeth" instead of "Mary" in this verse. A few scholars think the original reading was simply "and she said", which, of course, would mean that the subject is the previous speaker, Elisabeth. However, I do not think we need take all this too seriously. The textual evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of reading "Mary" in this verse. There is also a difference of feeling between the two poems. This is intangible, but none the less significant. The first one is tumultuous and excited. It suits the mood of Elisabeth who has just discovered Mary's thrilling secret. The second is much more calm and quiet. It is hard to think of it being uttered by the same speaker on the same occasion.

Mary's song starts with her personal feelings at what is happening, and she proceeds to dwell on God's great acts. He shows mercy throughout successive generations. He acts in ways which men find revolutionary and unexpected. He has now acted in accordance with His long-standing promise

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to send His Messiah. The language of the poem is largely biblical, there being many expressions found also in the Psalms. Especially are there resemblances to the Song of Hannah in 1 Sam. 2: 1-10, though the markedly different tone should not be overlooked. Hannah's song is one mighty shout of triumph at her vindication before her enemies: that of Mary is much more humble, as it dwells on the mercies of God. The poem divides naturally into four strophes, and we consider them in turn.

### FIRST STROPHE—MARY'S GRATITUDE (Luke 1: 46-48)

46 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, 47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. 48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

There is probably no great difference between "my soul" and "my spirit". We are dealing with poetry and the parallelism requires the thought of the first part to be repeated with some alterations. In each case the expression stands for Mary's innermost being, and we should not try to define and separate them with mathematical precision. The verb "doth magnify" is in the present continuous tense, and points to Mary's habitual attitude. "My soul keeps on magnifying the Lord" is the sense of it. There is a difference of tense when we come to "hath rejoiced". This is the aorist, the tense which usually refers to a single action in time past. Mary is probably referring to the time of the angel's visit. The verb is cognate with the noun rendered "joy" in verse 44, and, as we saw earlier, the meaning is rather "exultation". So here Mary says that she "exulted" in God, her Saviour.

The expression "God my Saviour" should be noted, for it tells strongly against the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This doctrine maintains that Mary, by a special miracle, was conceived and born free of original sin. It arises from the idea that Mary must be fit to be the mother



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of the Lord, but it goes far beyond anything that the Scripture says. It seems impossible to square it with words like these. When Mary speaks of her Saviour she recognizes that she has need of salvation, i.e. that she is a sinner. It is right that we should accord to Mary the honour due to her. It is no small honour, but the very highest that can come to woman, that she should be chosen to be the mother of the Lord Jesus. But that is no reason for going beyond and contrary to the Scripture. It is a great pity that legend has made so free with the name of Mary.

Mary proceeds to the way God has looked upon her. "He hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." The word rendered "low estate" often means "humiliation". That does not seem to be its meaning here (though Moffatt translates it that way), but clearly the term is a strong one. Mary insists that she was not a grand person in the way the world understands things. She was a poor maiden engaged to a village carpenter. Yet God was pleased to take notice of her. Her humility comes out also in the word "handmaiden" which is the usual word for a female slave. Goodspeed translates "he has noticed his slave in her humble station". The term "slave" was used somewhat more widely in those days than it is with us. Quite often a worshipper called himself the "slave" of his god. But it is a word expressive of a humble station for all that. Mary's choice of it carries on the note of genuine humility which we have seen to characterize all her utterances. She is impressed by God's condescension in that, though she was so lowly and unimportant, He yet deigned to look upon her.

She recognizes that the blessing she is receiving from Him is something that will give her a permanent status. "For, behold" is a lively expression drawing attention to what follows, and probably indicating that it was something unexpected. "From henceforth" ("from now on") emphasizes the critical event that was currently taking place within her. "All generations" extends the ascription to her of blessedness right through to the end of time. Mary is in no doubt as to the result of God's action.

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In this opening strophe, then, Mary dwells on her personal gratitude to God for all His favour to her, a favour that she knows is not merited. She, of course, had a particular reason for her gratitude, for she was to be the mother of the Messiah. But as we use this passage devotionally we may well follow out the thought and apply it to our own very different situation. For us, too, it is the case that our souls can magnify the Lord, and our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour. He has regarded the low estate of us, His slaves. We have no merits, no deservings, in His sight, yet He extends His favour to us. Well may we exult in personal gratitude to our Saviour for all His mercies toward us.

### SECOND STROPHE—GOD'S POWER AND HOLINESS AND MERCY (Luke 1: 49, 50)

49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

From her own gratitude Mary turns to God's greatness. In particular she picks out three attributes of God and speaks of them in turn. First she calls Him "he that is mighty", or, as Rieu translates it, "the Mighty One". As we have noticed a number of times Mary was rather quiet and reflective, personally humble and retiring. It is not without its interest accordingly that the first thing she seizes upon is God's might. This is an insight into the nature of God that we cannot do without if we are to live effective Christian lives today. We are caught up in the clash of mighty forces, forces like racialism, the clash of colour, rival ideologies and the like. We are appreciative of the horrors spelled out by modern weapons. Unparalleled destruction hangs over our heads. And we are so helpless and insignificant. What can ordinary people do to affect the destinies of nations? We do not want to see the forces of mass destruction unleashed. We know that if they are unleashed nobody will be safe. But what can we do? Nobody in high places

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takes much notice of what any individual humble citizen may care to say or do. It is a situation that might well drive men to despair: to know that all that we have and are could perish in a gigantic conflict and yet to be helpless to prevent such a conflict.

But for the Christian the situation does not end there. He thinks of God as "the Mighty One". He is over all. He has created all things. Though the heathen rage never so furiously they are not able to disturb His mighty plan. At best the forces that seem to us so mighty are the imaginings of puny man, and they can effect nothing against the power of a mighty God. He does what He pleases and makes even the wrath of man to praise Him. The Christian is one who has put his trust in such a God. He has handed his life over to God to be lived in the line of His will, to be used in the working out of His purpose. Whatever may be the immediate fate of men or of nations he knows that He is on the side that will finally triumph, for none can overthrow the Mighty One.

The Mighty One, says Mary, "hath done to me great things". He is not unmindful of His people. There is no such thing as an insignificant Christian. Every believer has been admitted into the family of God. He calls God "Father". Being one of the family, he matters to the Head of the house.

Mary does not stop with God's power. She moves on to think of His holiness, "and holy is his name". We have often had occasion in these studies to notice that in antiquity the "name" was used much more widely than with us. It was felt to sum up in some way the whole character and personality of the person concerned. Magicians and sorcerers and so forth thought that the knowledge of a name of a person or spirit gave power over that person or spirit. Magic spells often include long lists of what seem like nonsense syllables strung together. The point of them is that they are attempts at pronouncing the names of powerful spirits. The magicians thought that if they were successful in stumbling across a name in this way then the spirit must do their bidding. Of course, we have nothing like this in the Magnificat,



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and I mention these people only as showing how throughout the ancient world the "name" of anyone was thought of as having much greater significance than with us. Thus when Mary says "holy is his name" she means it is His essential character to be holy. God is not simply unrestrained power. If He is "the Mighty One", His name also is Holy.

Just as we need the thought of God's power in our modern situation, so do we need that of His holiness. There is a tendency to make man the measure of things, and to regard God as a means to man's well-being. He is thought of as giving us peace of mind, tranquillity and the like. His power avails to overcome the evil tendencies that arise within us. While there is a measure of truth in such positions, for God does give peace of mind and power to overcome evil, yet basically they are wrong. God is not a means to an end. Man is not a self-sufficient being, such that even God is there merely for his well-being. Man is a creature, and it is his highest good to serve God in His holiness. The holiness of God is a reminder that there are those high purposes which we must pursue.

Mary's third thought is that God is merciful. Primarily in this context there is in mind God's mercy in sending the Messiah. God had long promised the Deliverer, and now Mary knew that He was about to carry out this promise. In one way it showed His power, in another His holiness, but we must not overlook the fact that it also demonstrated His mercy. Without His taking action for our salvation in sending His Son we should never be saved. God has mercy on His people in all sorts of ways, but the outstanding example of this is in the action that Mary is commemorating. Mary does not speak of His mercy as being shown indiscriminately, but as being "on them that fear him". Those who in their proud self-sufficiency rely on their own achievement and turn away from God's proffered salvation need not look for His mercy. It is those humble souls who trustfully rely on Him, who have learned that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, who prove His mercy.

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"From generation to generation" is not an ideal translation of the Greek, although I suppose the impression it leaves is not far out. The expression is literally "unto generations and generations", which is somewhat like our "for ever and ever". The repetition of the word has the effect of emphasizing permanence. God's mercy never fails no matter how long generations may last. His mercy will continue right through to the very end of time, to the last generation. We, as much as any other generation, have cause to be thankful that this is so. Like the writer of old we may say, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3: 22 f.).

### THIRD STROPHE—GOD'S REVERSAL OF HUMAN VALUES (Luke 1: 51-53)

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. 53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

This is perhaps the heart of the whole song. Mary has worked up to this climax where we see the divine reversal of all human values. God has taken action against those who are highly regarded among men, the proud, the mighty, the rich. He has elevated the lowly and satisfied the hungry.

This reversal is strikingly exemplified in the cases of Elisabeth and of Mary herself. Neither was an important person as the world of that day counted important people. I imagine that no high government official, no prominent ecclesiastical dignitary, no social giant, would so much as know their names, let alone esteem them important people. Yet it was through them that God would work His will. They were the ones that He had chosen. God is not particularly interested in man's evaluation of what is important. He overturns judgments and does that which pleases Him.

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In this strophe there are six verbs (in the English compounded with "hath") each of which in the Greek is in the aorist. The tense is important, for it is the tense of single actions, usually in the past. I think that it is natural in reading the English translation to understand the passage as pointing to God's habitual actions. Again and again He has showed strength with His arm and so on. But I do not think that that is the meaning. There are two possibilities. One is that the words are a poetical prophecy of what God is about to do through the Messiah. In spirit Mary looks forward to the coming of her Son and to His triumph over human greatness. In principle God has already reversed human judgments. So sure is this that she can use the tense of completed action. Alternatively we might think of her as looking back through history, and referring to specific actions of God. This strophe would then be a recital of certain great deeds that God did in past days. Probably the former explanation is to be preferred.

"He hath shewed strength with his arm." Notice how the thought of the might of God runs through this poem. Men may rage how they will, but God's might is not affected. He shows strength when and how He wills. In particular His strength is directed against proud men. There is no article with "proud" in the Greek, so that it is not so much the proud as a class that is in mind but men whose characteristic it is to be proud. The word translated "imagination" has to do with thought. It is sometimes translated "mind", as, for example, in the passage where Christ told the rich young ruler "thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . with all thy mind" (Mark 12: 30). Here, then, it is not pride in general that is spoken of, but proud thinking. "Heart" is not used in antiquity to denote the emotions as with us. For men of the first century the emotions were located in the intestines (we still speak of "bowels of compassion"). They held that thought took place in the midriff, while the heart on occasion could denote either. More usually it was a kind of shorthand expression for the whole of a man's inner states, thought, feelings, will. In this context the meaning will be



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something like "the thoughts in their innermost being". Mary is speaking of men who are proud through and through. These men God has scattered. They can no more stand against Him than chaff against the wind.

As was the case with "proud", "mighty" has no article. It is not the mighty considered as a known, definite group, but men whose characteristic is that they are mighty on whom the emphasis falls. It is a way of stressing their power rather than the fact that they belong together. We might translate "He put down potentates from thrones". The thought is that those who are in positions of supreme authority among men are helpless in the face of God. Over against that is the complementary truth that "He raised up lowly folk". People like Elisabeth and Mary are in mind. They do not matter to earth's potentates, but when these exalted people are dethroned by God it is lowly people that He exalts.

There is a very revolutionary idea in verse 53, "hungry people he filled with good things, and rich men he sent away empty". This would sound even more revolutionary to men in a day when physical hunger was so widespread, and was accepted as inevitable. In the social order of the first century nobody questioned the right of the rich to the good things of life. It was natural that they should have all that they wanted, and just as natural that the very poor should go hungry now and then, sometimes oftener than that. Mary proclaims God's reversal of all this. It is hungry people (the word comes first for emphasis) that God has filled. Probably we are to take these words as referring to physical hunger, but to physical hunger as symbolizing spiritual hunger. We are reminded of our Lord's words, "Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled" (Luke 6: 21). Though only physical hunger is mentioned few will doubt that the meaning is the same as that of Matt. 5: 6, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled". God looks to men's needs, not to their bank accounts. Those who hunger after the deep things of God may justly look to Him to satisfy those needs. But those who

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are smug and self-satisfied and complacent about their achievements and their resources go away empty. Such may expect nothing from the Lord.

### FOURTH STROPHE—GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (Luke 1: 54, 55)

54 He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;  
55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

The Greek behind these two verses is very awkward. Probably we should take it in a way similar to that of the Revised Version. That is to say God's helping of Israel is that He might remember His mercy toward Abraham and Abraham's seed, while "as he spake to our fathers" is a parenthesis. "He hath holpen" is in the aorist tense, that tense of a single action, and we should certainly understand it as a prophetic statement of what God was about to do in the mission of the Messiah. By sending His Son He was to help Israel in accordance with His promises from of old. In the expression "his servant Israel" "servant" is not the word for bondservant or slave (as often is the case) but one which might mean "child". It is like the English "boy", which might refer to one's son, or, in certain conditions, to one's servant. The use of this particular term draws attention to the closeness of the relationship between Israel and Israel's God.

The sending of the Christ, then, is God's way of remembering His mercy to Abraham and Abraham's descendants for ever. It is something that He "spake to our fathers". Both these are ways of reminding us of God's faithfulness. Centuries before He had spoken to Abraham, and again and again He had spoken to the fathers in days of old, promising to send the Messiah, who would deliver men from their sins. God is faithful. What He says, He does. We may rely on Him.

This, too, is something that we cannot do without. We live in a day when men all too often cynically break faith.

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Expediency is the guide. Faithfulness is honoured in the abstract, but not so much practised in the concrete. It is fatally easy to be infected by the general outlook of the day. This concluding section of our little poem is a reminder that for Christians there are wider horizons than those of expediency and self-interest. We serve a God who can be relied upon at all times. Which has its corollary that we must be like Him.

### *Mary's Return* (Luke 1: 56)

56 And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

This seems to mean that Mary left just before the birth of Elisabeth's child, which is narrated in the next verse. It is just possible that Luke completes this section of narrative about Mary and then returns to Elisabeth without meaning to imply that his story is in consecutive order. This seems to be the way Knox takes it with his rendering, "Mary returned home when she had been with her about three months; meanwhile, Elisabeth's time had come for her child-bearing, and she bore a son" (though he notes the ambiguity in a footnote). But this is not what we would expect from the Greek order. It seems as though Mary returned to her own home just before the birth of John.

When Elisabeth's son was born there would certainly be an influx of friends and relations to see him, and to offer their congratulations and good wishes. It may be that Mary felt it wiser, in view of her condition, to be away from the crowd. Whether that was the reason or not, she stayed with her kinswoman for about three months, and then returned to her own home.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SONG OF ZACHARIAS

(Luke 1: 57-80)

UP till now our studies have been mostly in the realm of prophecy. There have been angel messages to Zacharias and Mary, and the Holy Spirit has come upon Elisabeth. We move now to the realm of fulfilment with the birth of Elisabeth's son. This was a time of great joy and festivity as we might imagine. It was marked by the return of Zacharias' speech, and his use of this newly recovered faculty to utter a hymn of outstanding beauty and depth.

#### *The Birth of Elisabeth's Son (Luke 1: 57, 58)*

57 Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. 58 And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her.

Very simply Luke tells how the promise of the angel was fulfilled to Zacharias and Elisabeth. Elisabeth's pregnancy ran its full course, and she gave birth to a son. The news spread abroad among the people who lived near, and among her relations. "Cousins" is the same word as that used in verse 36. It means kinsfolk, relations in general, and not the particular relationship denoted by the English term "cousin". "Shewed great mercy upon" renders an expression which is literally "magnified his mercy with". This is a Hebraistic expression, and Rieu gives us the sense of it, "she had been granted this signal mercy by the Lord". It is a way

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of underlining the fact that the Lord had been particularly gracious to His servant. He had done more for Elisabeth than she had dared to hope. This news being spread abroad, the neighbours and relations joined in the aged couple's rejoicing.

### *The Naming of the Child* (Luke 1: 59-63)

59. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. 60 And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. 61 And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. 62 And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. 63 And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all.

We do not know a great deal about the way circumcision was carried out during the first century, but clearly it was a time when friends and the family gathered in strength. It was a happy occasion. It was also an occasion when customs were observed fairly rigidly, as is plain from the fact that those present objected to the mother's departure from the normal course in her naming of the child.

From the narrative it would seem that the name was given at the time of the circumcision, though we cannot be absolutely sure about that. In the Old Testament the name seems to have been given at birth. Here the meaning may be that the friends and relations were calling the child Zacharias, though not in the sense of giving it its name. But a strong argument against this is the fact that Zacharias received back his speech only on this day when he wrote "His name is John". This seems to point to an official naming. It may be significant that elsewhere in the ancient world children were usually named at a time roughly corresponding to that of the Jewish rite of circumcision. This was prescribed for the eighth day. The Romans named girls on the eighth day and boys on the ninth (evidently they required an extra day to be sure of the right name for the important sex!). Greeks named them both on the tenth day.

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On the whole it seems that the Jews did name children in the first century on the eighth day, and that we are here dealing with an official ceremony of giving the name.

This being so, "they called him Zacharias" will not be the right translation. "They tried to call him Zacharias" is rather the meaning, or, as Knox puts it, "they were for calling him Zachary". Obviously they did not succeed in calling him by this name. Neither Elisabeth nor Zacharias would stand for it. But they made the attempt.

Why they wanted him to be "Zacharias" is not at all clear. It was rather more usual for a child to be named after his grandfather than his father. Our knowledge of the New Testament shows us that not many of the people named there had the same names as their fathers. However, it is true that men were often so named, and the visitors to Zacharias' home on this great day for some reason expected that this would be done.

We have already noticed more than once that the name meant far more to the people of the ancient world than it does with us. The giving of a name to a child was thus something to be done very seriously. It represented the linking of the child with the family, which explains why the name was usually that of the grandfather or the father. Occasionally there would be some very good reason for adopting a different procedure (in the Old Testament there are examples, as here, of divinely given names which differed from the family names, e.g., Gen. 17: 19; Isa. 8: 3). The name in some way summed up the whole person. It expressed all that he was. It was thus important that the name should connect the child with the family, and so the custom persisted of naming children after the grandfather or the father.

But on this occasion there was an obstacle. The child's mother refused point blank. "Not so" is an emphatic negative. In New Testament Greek there are three negatives. One grammarian with a humorous cast of mind illustrates the difference between them by saying that if a young man proposes and the young lady says "*Mē*", he would be well advised to try again. It is a tentative "No". If she says



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"*Ou*" the case is more serious. It is a more definite negative. If she says "*Ouchi*" he may as well get his hat and go home. Her "No" is emphatic.

It is this last, and strongest, negative that Elisabeth employs. It shuts the door to the suggestion. She will have nothing to do with this name for the child. Instead she says "but he shall be called John". Her word for "but" is also a rather strong one, signifying "but on the contrary". Some have speculated on how Elisabeth knew the name, and have wondered whether she, like Zacharias, had had an angel visit to acquaint her with the information. This seems to me to be wasted ingenuity. This very narrative shows us that Zacharias was quite used to wielding a writing pad. During the long winter evenings he had had plenty of time to write notes to his wife. There is not the slightest difficulty in seeing how Elisabeth might well have come by this piece of information.

But the family was not beaten yet. They pointed out to Elisabeth that "There is none of thy kindred (i.e. 'family' as Moffatt renders) that is called by this name". This represents for them a decisive objection. "John," they might well have said, "is quite a decent respectable name. We have nothing against it as a piece of nomenclature. But you can't call the child John when nobody in the family bears that name!" It is the strong family feeling coming out. The child must be linked with the family, and a name like John, they thought, would not do this. They could not take Elisabeth's suggestion seriously.

Faced with an intractable mother they appealed over her head to the still dumb father, the head of the house. They "made signs" to Zacharias, inquiring what name he wanted the child to have. Why did they make signs? Up till now we have heard of Zacharias being dumb, but there is nothing about his being deaf as well. It is, of course, possible that the shock they had just received made them forget that Zacharias could hear. Knowing he could not speak they may have gone ahead in sign language without pausing to reflect that words would have done as well. But it is also

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possible that Zacharias was deaf during this period as well as dumb. The emphasis has been on his not being able to speak, but nothing has been said to exclude the possibility of his also being unable to hear. We just do not know. "Made signs" incidentally is in continuous tense. They kept on making signs. This may be a mark of their urgency, or perhaps of the difficulty of getting their meaning over. After all it is not easy on the spur of the moment to think of a sign to ask what name a baby should have!

Zacharias "asked for a writing table". This, too, would be by signs, though that is not mentioned. The "writing table" would be a piece of wood covered in wax, and the writing would be done by a stylus which would make marks in the wax. These could be erased and the wax used again. Such an article must have been invaluable to Zacharias during the time of his enforced silence. The word order of his message is "John is the name of him". John comes first with emphasis. There was to be no doubt about it. "Is" is also emphatic, and this is important. Zacharias does not say, "We will call him John", or even, "John will be his name". For the old priest the matter was already settled. The child could not be named by his parents, for he had already been named by God. That was the end of it. Zacharias could not say what name he wanted. He could only tell the inquirers the name that had already been given. It is not surprising that "they marvelled all". It was an astonishing thing that Elisabeth should refuse to name the child by a family name. It was even more marvellous that Zacharias should agree with her so firmly, not only in rejecting a family name, but also in giving John as the boy's name.

### *Zacharias' Speech Returns* (Luke 1: 64-66)

64 And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. 65 And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea. 66 And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him.

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Now comes Zacharias' big moment. He has been unable to speak for several months. But now, as he finally completes obedience to the angel's command by giving the name of the child as John, his speech returns. That his speech is said to have come back "immediately" shows that it was the result of his act of obedience. There is a very interesting change of tense in the Greek verbs used here. As we have often noticed in our Bible studies, much can be learnt from the Greek tenses. The first verb, "was opened", is in the aorist tense, the tense of a single action in time past. The Authorized Version has the verb "loosed" after "his tongue", but as the italics show, there is nothing corresponding to this in the original. The translators felt it a little awkward to say that his tongue was "opened", so that they put in another verb. What this opening tells us then is that in a moment Zacharias received his speech back. He could use his mouth and his tongue normally. But when we come to the verb "spake" we have the imperfect tense, which is a continuous tense. That is to say, Zacharias kept on speaking and praising God. His recovery of speech was instantaneous. His praise of God was continuous. His heart was so full of all the wonderful things that God had done, and was doing, that he could not stop. He kept on praising his God.

The effect of all this on the bystanders is now noted. "Fear" is not a good English rendering of this part of the text. The people were not afraid in our sense of the term. They were not scared. Rather they "were all filled with awe" (Rieu). It is that fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom that is in mind. The striking series of events so impressed the neighbours that they could not but see that the hand of God was in it all. They recognized the immediate presence of God. They discerned His working. And in this close proximity to their Maker they were humbled and filled with awe. Zacharias had not spoken for nine months, but in a moment, when he gave the child the same unexpected name as the boy's mother had done, his speech came back unimpaired and he praised God. Small wonder that they were deeply moved.



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Those who saw and heard were not slow to speak of these great happenings, so that the news spread abroad throughout all the hill country. This is not surprising, and simply shows us that people were just as fond of gossiping in those days as they are today. It was extraordinary that Zacharias and Elisabeth should have a child at their age. It was even more extraordinary that his birth should have been attended by such miraculous circumstances. So tongues wagged all over the hill country, and everyone came to know something of the divine over-ruling in the bringing of John into the world.

But Luke does not leave us with the impression that this was simply a process of idle gossip. Those that heard of these things "laid them up in their hearts". The news made a deep impression on these simple country folk, and they did not quickly forget. They took it to heart as they mused on the kind of man this child would be. Obviously, with such a beginning, he was to be no ordinary person. "What manner of child shall this be!" is more accurately "What thing therefore will this child be?" The use of the neuter "what thing" makes it somewhat more indefinite and somewhat more comprehensive. It leaves open the possibility of supernatural developments, and indicates that because of what they had already heard they looked forward to something more striking and unusual. It is likely that we should read the next words as "for also the hand of the Lord was with him". If the "for" is correct then the subsequent development of John confirmed the watchers that he was no ordinary child. They saw that God was with him. We are not told how this was manifested, but in some way it became clear to them all that God had a special destiny for this boy.

## THE BENEDICTUS

Luke switches attention back to Zacharias. He has told us that he praised God, but has not given indication as to the line his praises took. Now he gives us a beautiful hymn that he tells us Zacharias uttered as a result of the Holy Spirit's coming upon him. The song of Zacharias, like that of Mary,

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is reminiscent of the Old Testament. Clearly both had long meditated on the sacred writings, so that they naturally uttered their own praises in words and phrases taken from their Bible. This song is called the *Benedictus* from its opening word in the Latin translation.

A very interesting feature of this song is that, although Zacharias had just become the father of a boy whom he knew to have a divinely appointed destiny, yet the singer concentrates on God's mercy in sending the Messiah. Primarily the song is an outpouring of praise that God is now beginning to accomplish the work of redemption. It is not until verse 76, well down in the song, that Zacharias turns his attention to the infant John. What he says there shows us that he is not unmindful of the importance of the child, and this makes his earlier dwelling on God's mercy in redemption all the more impressive.

### *Introduction to the Song (Luke 1: 67)*

67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,

Luke makes it clear that the song that follows is not simply the utterance of a devout man. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, and may be referred to as a prophecy. Prophecy is often misunderstood in modern times, when people have taken the word to denote prediction. Biblical prophecy often has an element of prediction (this song has). But it is not the prediction that is primary. Basically the prophet is a man who can say, "Thus saith the Lord". Prophecy is the process of passing on to men the word that comes direct from God. Other men may speak about God. The prophet speaks from God. Obviously prophecy cannot be commanded. Men may prophesy only as God directs them. So now, on this great occasion, the Holy Spirit fills the aged priest, and he speaks words direct from God.

We are not told exactly when this took place. There may have been a little interval after the events narrated in the

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previous verses. Or the words may be those that Zacharias uttered in the supreme moment when his speech came back. While certainty is unattainable, it seems to me that the latter is most likely to be the truth of the matter.

The song divides into four strophes. In the first, Zacharias gives expression to his thanksgiving for God's mercy in sending the Messiah (68-70). In the second, he dwells on the nature of the deliverance the Messiah would effect (71-75). In the third, he turns to the part that his own little son would play (76 f.), while in the last, he returns thankfully to a contemplation of the Messianic salvation (78 f.).

### *First Strophe—Thanksgiving for the Messiah (Luke 1: 68-70)*

68 Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, 69 And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; 70 As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began:

"Blessed" is the usual way of introducing a thanksgiving in Jewish prayers. "Blessed art thou, O Lord," is the common formula, after which comes that for which thanks are being offered. Zacharias uses the solemn title "the Lord God of Israel". The greatness of God is much before his mind, and this full title is most appropriate accordingly.

The matter of the thanksgiving is that "he hath visited and redeemed his people". What Zacharias has in mind is the whole act of redemption that was to be wrought out in the Messiah who was not yet come. The use of the past tense does not, in this context, signify an action that is over. It is a case of what is called "the prophetic past". That is to say, the prophet discerns that God has determined that a certain thing will take place. That God has willed it is the decisive thing. A small matter like the actual running off of the event is neither here nor there. God's will is the important thing. Once that is clear the rest must follow as the night the day. Nothing can interfere with the working out of God's purpose.



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Accordingly the prophet uses the past tense though the great acts that God will perform are yet future. This use of the past is the measure of his certainty. So is it here with Zacharias. He knows full well that his son is to be the fore-runner, and that John has just been born. The Messiah must still be future. God's promised redemption accordingly is also still in the future. But to the eye of God's servant it is crystal clear that God has determined on this act of redemption, indeed, that He is on the point of accomplishing it. The events associated with the coming of John are but the first acts in this great drama of redemption. Zacharias speaks with certainty of God as having visited and redeemed His people.

Redemption is a term that we use rather loosely. For us it often means something like salvation. But a careful examination of the use of the term in antiquity shows that it had then a more specific meaning. It was the process whereby a slave was released from his slavery by the payment of a price, or whereby a condemned person was released from his sentence of condemnation, again by the payment of a price. The price-paying idea is constant. Various metaphorical usages developed, but I think the basic idea remains. When God is said to have redeemed His people it is not meant that He paid a price to anybody. But it is meant that He performed a deliverance that cost Him something. Redemption is always at cost, and Christians know that in the fullest sense it eventually cost God His Son.

Zacharias goes on to say that God has "raised up an horn of salvation for us". A "horn" is the symbol of strength. The thought is of a mighty Saviour (Moffatt translates, "he has raised up a strong saviour for us"). Nothing can interfere with the salvation that He came to bring. This "horn" is spoken of as being raised up "in the house of his servant David". This has two points of importance. The one is that it shows clearly that Zacharias is referring to Christ and not to John. Jesus came from the house of David, but John did not. The other is that it has its bearing on the lineage of Mary. Zacharias could hardly have spoken in this way if

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she, as well as Joseph, were not from the royal house of David. Some have felt that Joseph's descent from his house would be sufficient to satisfy the needs of this statement. But at this moment Mary's future was not known to Zacharias. Until her pregnancy became obvious to Joseph it would not be known what action he would take. Zacharias could not know whether Mary would be divorced or not. When he speaks with certainty of her child as being of the house of David the implication is clearly that Mary was of the Davidic descent. I would not deny that it would be possible for the old priest, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to foresee what would happen, but, though other things are predicted in his song, there is nothing about Mary's future. The natural way of understanding what he says is not that he foresaw Joseph's attitude, but that he knew that Mary came of the royal line.

The salvation for which Zacharias looked, and for which he praised God, was not a new idea. It had been spoken of by God's prophets ever since the world began. This is a way of emphasizing that God's plan does not change from age to age. It may appear to men that He is doing nothing, or that He adapts Himself to circumstances. But this is nothing but appearance. From of old He has determined what He will do, and history is the stage on which His great plan is being worked out. So the salvation of which Zacharias sings is something that has been spoken of from of old by the prophets who have declared God's purpose. The description of the prophets as "holy" stresses their close connection with God. They are set apart for His service. Their message is not good human advice but a divine revelation. What they say has special relevance accordingly.

### *Second Strophe—The Great Deliverance (Luke 1: 71-75)*

71 That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; 72 To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; 73 The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, 74 That he would grant unto us, that

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we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, 75 In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

There is some difficulty in the construction here. "That we should be saved" is actually a noun, "salvation", which makes the sentence rather difficult to construe. Probably we are to take "salvation" as in apposition with and further describing the "horn of salvation" in verse 69. Fortunately our uncertainty as to the construction does not extend to the meaning. Zacharias has turned his attention to the nature of the deliverance that the Messiah was to bring. He describes it first of all as deliverance from all our enemies. Some understand this in terms of the Jewish political situation. They feel that what is in mind is the liberation of the Jews from the Roman yoke, and from danger from any of their enemies. While it is true that this is the kind of thing that many Jews looked to the Messiah to accomplish, it is hard to think that this is Zacharias' meaning. In verse 74 he thinks of deliverance in terms of the freedom to serve God, and in verse 77 he defines it in terms of forgiveness of sins. Clearly it is an ethical and spiritual salvation of which Zacharias sings.

"To perform the mercy promised to our fathers" brings us back to the thought that the Messianic salvation was no afterthought with God. It was His plan from of old. Clearly Zacharias greatly valued the heritage of his nation, with its evidence through centuries of God's dealings with the people. He knew how that God had promised the Messiah from of old. What was happening now was simply God's implementing of His promised mercy.

It is along this line that the following expression must be understood. A "covenant" was something like a business agreement. Men might enter into binding agreements with one another, and when they did they were said to have made a "covenant" with one another. When God took the people to be His own people the Old Testament writers said that He "made a covenant" with them. There are many covenants



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in the Old Testament; the most important of them all is that made with Abraham, of which we read in Genesis 17. There is another covenant of importance in Exodus 24, but it is the covenant with Abraham which the New Testament writers regard as continuing. The covenant of Exodus 24 is replaced with "the new covenant" of which Christ spoke when he instituted the Holy Communion (Mark 14: 24; "testament" there means "covenant"). But the covenant with Abraham is thought of as of permanent validity, as we see from Paul's treatment of the subject in Gal. 3: 13-18. In the same way Zacharias was inspired to see that the sending of the Messiah which was about to take place was in fulfilment of God's promises made to Abraham so many centuries before.

There are several parts to the making of a covenant, such as the offering of sacrifice, the fellowship meal, the calling to witness. But so central was the swearing of an oath that each of the parties would keep the terms of the covenant, that sometimes the whole covenant could be spoken of as an "oath". Zacharias follows this procedure here. He first speaks of God's "holy covenant" (or, as Goodspeed translates, "sacred agreement"), and then goes on to "the oath which he sware to our father Abraham". These two are one and the same. Zacharias has not moved on to some different subject, but is giving the terms of the covenant or oath.

God undertook then to grant to His people that they would be delivered from their enemies and serve Him without fear. "Without fear in" is an emphatic position in the Greek. That His servants should not be afraid is important to God. The particular word used for "serve" is one that in the New Testament is always used of service offered to God (outside the Scripture it is sometimes used of service to man). It is not particularly the service of priests, but might be offered by anyone, cleric or lay, slave or free. It is a reminder of the dignity attaching to the special service of God. Moffatt translates "worship", but the term is used in a wider way, of service in general.

This service is characterized by holiness and righteousness.

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The former term basically has to do with the character involved in being set apart for God. We usually do not get the special significance of holiness these days, for we think of it as much the same as righteousness. This is a mistake. Holiness means being set apart for God. It might apply to vessels used in divine service, to the temple, to the priests who were given over to God, to the nation which was God's people. The reason that holiness has come to mean much the same as righteousness with us is that the God we worship is a moral God. As such He demands upright living in those who are His own. Thus when people are holy it follows that they must be righteous. Yet we should be clear in our minds that the particular meaning of holiness is the being set apart for God, not the righteousness which is its consequence. So Zacharias looks to God to provide the means whereby His people may be able to live dedicated lives without their enemies preventing them.

He goes on also to think of the righteousness that should characterize them. Righteousness is a clamant demand of the New Testament. Because we are God's people, redeemed by His Son, we must live the kind of lives that befit God's people. We must employ only the very highest standards. And this, Zacharias notes, is not a brief spasm, brilliant while it lasts but soon over. We are to live like this "all the days of our life". God's people have entered into a permanently binding relationship. What an important thing is perseverance! It is easy to be caught in a wave of enthusiasm, to think of ourselves as God's people, to be deeply stirred. Or even to do this without much emotional excitement. We can be convicted in our reason that this is the right way, and set out in it bravely. But it is easy, too, quietly to fall away. We all too readily find our enthusiasm dulled, our standards the standards of the world, and insensibly we take a different path. Zacharias thought of salvation as including the service of God all our days.

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### *Third Strophe—The Place of John* (Luke 1: 76, 77)

76 And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for  
thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;  
77 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission  
of their sins.

Having dwelt on the Messianic salvation which mattered so intensely to his devout soul, Zacharias turns now to his own little son, and to the part he would play. The opening words, "And thou", render a very tricky piece of Greek. It contains both contrast and combination. John in one sense is set over against the Messiah. He is not the Messiah, but someone different. But he is also linked with the Messiah. He is not to perform a completely independent piece of work, but one which fits in closely with that of the Messiah. Weymouth translates "and you moreover", which is an attempt to catch something of the flavour of the Greek.

John's role is given as that of "the (or better, 'a') prophet of the Highest". Zacharias is placing his own son within the company of the "holy prophets" of which he has already made mention (verse 70). Whether he is also assigning him a special place among them is not quite certain. That John had such a place is clear from the words of the Lord Jesus, who said that John was "a prophet . . . and more than a prophet . . . Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11: 9-11). Zacharias may have had some such thing in mind, for he gives as the reason for his statement, "for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways". John's specific task was to be the Lord's forerunner. He was to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

This was to be done by letting men know that salvation consisted in "the remission of their sins". This John did faithfully. He was a stern prophet, and all Judæa was to echo with his call to repentance, his insistence that men could not be saved unless their sin was dealt with. This message is still the foundation of all real Christian life. John



faced men with the reality of their sin. Then it was up to them to see that this sin was dealt with by their faith in that Greater One who was to die to put away their sin.

*Fourth Strophe—The Messianic Salvation (Luke 1: 78, 79)*

78 Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring  
from on high hath visited us, 79 To give light to them that sit in  
darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way  
of peace.

At the conclusion of this song Zacharias turns back in his thought to the Messianic salvation which arises from the "tender mercy" of God. The word "tender mercy" is not without its interest. It refers primarily to the internal organs, which the Greeks understood to be the seat of the emotions. The interesting thing is that when it is used in classical Greek it denotes anger and the like. When a man is deeply moved it is to self-assertion. He shows his manliness by demonstrating that he is not to be trifled with. But in the Christian writings it always means "tender mercy". When a man is deeply moved it is to compassion. He shows his real spiritual stature by his tender concern for others. The changed meaning the Christians gave this one word is eloquent of the difference that Christianity made to the whole of life.

"The dayspring from on high" is difficult. The word rendered "dayspring" means "rising", and it is often used of the rising of the sun, and thus comes to signify "dawn". The difficulty is that the dawn does not take place in the high places of the sky ("from on high") but in the lower places. However, perhaps in poetry we should not be looking for too rigid definition of terms. An interesting point is that the word sometimes is used in the Old Testament of the rising from the root of a plant, i.e. a "shoot", and in this way it is used of the Messiah in the "Branch" prophecies. The term had Messianic associations, and was also used of the coming of light, and that will be why Zacharias uses it.

## THE SONG OF ZACHARIAS

The imagery in these two verses is of a group of travellers overtaken in a desert place by darkness. They are lost. They do not know which way to go. They are in danger. Wild beasts may devour them. They may never find the way, but perish in the desert. Then in the darkness comes a light on high, probably a star. It shows them the right way, and they are able to escape.

Darkness is frequently used in the Scripture as a symbol of alienation from God. While we are in our sins we are lost. We do not know the way. We cannot see light anywhere. We may well perish, for "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6: 23). Then in our darkness the true light shines. God sends His Messiah to lighten our way. So we are delivered from "the shadow of death" and we are guided into "the way of peace".

### *John's Early Days (Luke 1: 80)*

80 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

Luke appends a short note to describe John's growing up. As we should have anticipated from the nature of his birth, and from the prophecies that went before on him, he was a man strong in the things of the spirit. We may legitimately feel that God watched over his development.

The evangelist also tells us that John was "in the deserts" habitually. The word does not mean arid wastes of sand, but rather "deserted places". It refers often to grazing land, land where flocks and herds may get enough to eat, but where there is not enough rain for agriculture. "Wilder-ness" might give us the sense of it. There is no permanent settlement, and such places are lonely ones. It was in such places that John used to live. The expression indicates something of the character of John. He was a rugged personality, with something of the strength of the lonely places in his soul.

Throughout this passage the great theme has been the

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working out of God's purposes. Nobody in that day took much notice of people like Zacharias and Elisabeth and Mary. While John lived in the deserted places he was not a figure to strike terror into the hearts of the boldest. The whole circle of events which these names represent must have seemed quite insignificant.

But Zacharias with true spiritual perception is able to see that this is the decisive time and these are the decisive events. God is acting for the salvation of all mankind. God is fulfilling those prophecies which have been uttered through the centuries. This is the critical moment, on which all history pivots.

As our thoughts turn to Christmas we are reminded that God's ways are not our ways, and that His thoughts are not our thoughts. He does not choose the spectacular and the strong as men count them. He works out His purpose in the quietness, through the world's insignificant ones. But He does work out His purpose. Nothing can interfere with that.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE BIRTH OF JESUS

(Luke 2: 1-20; Matt. 1: 24, 25)

#### *The Census* (Luke 2: 1-3)

<sup>1</sup> And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. <sup>2</sup> (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)  
<sup>3</sup> And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

THESE verses present us with a number of problems, most of them still not solved. They are therefore a kind of happy hunting ground for the theologians and historians. The trouble is that our knowledge of the history of this period is far from complete, and it is not easy to see how Luke's statements fit in with what knowledge we have.

The first verse speaks of "a decree" that "all the world should be taxed". This last word should be rendered "enrolled". It refers to the taking of a census, not to the levying of taxation. However, governments in the ancient world being much the same as those in the modern period, the census was the prelude to organized taxation, so perhaps the mistranslation is not so very misleading! More serious is the fact that no such law is known to us from the time of this Emperor. Moreover, the information that has come down to us does not indicate that a census was actually taken throughout the whole Empire, though one certainly was taken in some parts of it. Perhaps the answer is that the word rendered "decree" is not specific. It can refer to any edict coming from a duly constituted authority, and does not necessarily point to an official law, drawn up in due form.

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It is known that Augustus set in hand a reorganization of the whole complicated system of governing his vast Empire. It is not in the least unlikely that he set in motion the machinery for a universal census, though without the formality of a duly codified law to that end. The census had not been completed at his death, but it was certainly started during his lifetime. We may well feel that this statement of Luke's fits in with what we know of the state of affairs at that period of the Empire.

But the heart of the difficulty lies in verse 2, where we are told that the enrolment was made during the time of Cyrenius, or Quirinius, to give him his Latin name. It is distinguished from another enrolment by being called "the first enrolment" (so the Revised Version; the Authorized Version's "was first made" cannot be defended). Now it is known that Cyrenius was governor of Syria from A.D. 6 onwards, and that he carried out a census during that time. This census is mentioned in Acts 5: 37. It was a very well known census because it provoked serious riots. The Jews resisted it strongly, holding that it infringed some of the tenets of their religion.

There are two separate difficulties here. The one is the time of Cyrenius' governorship, and the other is whether there could have been a census prior to that of A.D. 6, which is far too late to be the one meant by Luke.

Now while Cyrenius was governor only at the later time there is evidence that he was active in the lands about the eastern end of the Mediterranean at an earlier period, when the governor was Varus. The verb Luke uses, and which is translated "was governor", is a general term, and may denote supervision of various kinds. It is quite applicable to a governor, but it may equally be applied to the exercise of many other kinds of authority. If Cyrenius were in Syria with a special commission during the governorship of Varus all the conditions would seem to be met.

The fact that the census of A.D. 6 provoked serious riots is urged by some as convicting Luke of inaccuracy. A first census, they point out, might well provoke trouble, but after

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it was carried through people would realize the futility of opposing it. A second census would be more peaceful than a first. They also remind us that there is no record of an earlier census apart from this statement by St. Luke.

The matter would seem to be capable of solution along these lines. In other places we know that it was the custom to take the census about once in fourteen years. Counting back from A.D. 6 this would mean sometime after about 8 B.C., and this seems to be about right. We do not know exactly when Jesus was born, but it would be during the early years B.C. of our era. At this time Judæa was nominally ruled by its own king Herod. The Romans were the real rulers, but they kept up the fiction that Herod was king, and the point is that they did know how to keep up such fictions. They allowed such a petty king a certain amount of latitude. He was not, of course, permitted to pursue policies of which the Romans disapproved. But as long as he was in the general line of their will they gave him liberty to do things in his own way. The position then would be that the Romans told Herod to take a census, and he did it in his own way, observing Jewish customs. The Jews accordingly would not be unduly perturbed. Easton points out that "it would be quite like Herod's skill in governing Jews to disguise the foreign nature of the command by an appeal to tribal patriotism" (cited in Manson). But when in A.D. 6 the census was again taken there was no Jewish king, even in name. Judæa was ruled by a Roman procurator, who would certainly have taken the census in the Roman way with scant regard for Jewish customs and sensibilities. Accordingly there were riots.

I do not suggest that this approach settles all the difficulties. But I do not wish to engage on a long and serious discussion of such matters. It would be out of place in such a work as this. All that I wish to make clear is that there are some matters in connection with the opening words of this chapter which are in dispute. Yet we can discern the outlines of a satisfactory solution, and we may be content with that.

Verse 3 tells us something of the method of enrolment.



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Everyone went "into his own city". This seems to us a rather cumbersome procedure, though when we consider the masses of red tape that seem inseparable from the processes of government in general, and being taxed in particular, in these enlightened days we may well hesitate to criticize the ancients. The different conditions must be borne in mind. In these days travel is easy, and many people leave the place of their birth. Travel was not so easy in the first century (although under the Romans it was easier than at any subsequent time down to the modern era). Moreover many people did not want to travel. Multitudes of men and women preferred to grow up in their own particular locality and stay there till they died. The result was that, while in the aggregate a large number of people had moved from their place of origin, the majority probably had not. By issuing an order that everyone go back home the wanderers returned for a space, and whole families were reunited. In this way the officials found it easier to complete family enrolments. This method of enrolment is found elsewhere, and Adolph Deissmann is able to quote an edict of Gaius Vibius Maximus, the governor of Egypt, dated A.D. 104, in which "all who for any cause soever are outside their nomes (i.e. districts)", are notified that they must "return to their domestic hearths, that they may also accomplish the customary dispensation of enrolment".<sup>1</sup> Deissmann incidentally points out that Luke employs official "departmental language" in reporting this instruction.

### *The Journey of Joseph and Mary (Luke 2: 4, 5)*

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

As a consequence of this method of enrolment Joseph found himself under the necessity of making the journey

<sup>1</sup> *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 271.

from Nazareth of Galilee to Bethlehem of Judæa. Bethlehem is described as "the city of David". Its connection with the great king of centuries before was not forgotten. David had lifted the nation from a condition of subjection to the Philistines to the heights of greatness. But more than that—he was the man after God's own heart. So he was remembered as the ideal king. A combination of patriotism and piety kept his memory green. The name Bethlehem means "house of bread". It points to the fertility of the land which had evidently led to a granary being established just there, from which the city took its name. Though it is spoken of as a city it was rather a small place. We have already seen that the lack of a Greek word for "town" means that many places were called "cities" which we should not dignify with this title. Joseph was of the family of David. Accordingly he had to return with the others of this house to Bethlehem and there be enrolled (this is the meaning of the verb which is once more rendered "taxed"). An interesting minor point is that though the city is called "the city of David" that king seems to have had little to do with the place after coming to the throne. Similarly, Jesus was born there, but we have no record of His ever visiting Bethlehem again.

There are one or two points about the reference to Mary. She is spoken of as "Mary, who was betrothed to him" (R.V.). There is no "wife" in the original. Questions immediately arise: Why does Luke refer to Mary as betrothed to Joseph? Was she not married to him? If so why is she referred to as betrothed only? If not why were they travelling together?

The answers to such questions are probably to be discerned from some references in the first chapter of Matthew. There we read in verse 20 that the angel said to Joseph, "fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife", and in verse 24 that he "did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife". From this, and from the fact that they are found travelling together, there can be no doubt that the two were by this time legally man and wife. The other passage is Matt. 1: 25 which tells us that Joseph "knew her not till

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she had brought forth her firstborn son". That is to say, though they were married they were living as engaged people.

The other point about the reference to Mary is the statement that she was "great with child". This should probably be taken as the reason for the journey ("because she was great with child"), rather than as no more than a description of her condition at the time ("being great with child") as both the Authorized and the Revised Versions take it. Her presence on the journey was not necessary from the enrolment point of view. Even if she had property before her marriage the presence of her husband was all that the law would require. Under normal circumstances she would not have been taken on so long and trying a journey in her condition. But the circumstances were not normal. From 1:56 we learn that about three months of Mary's pregnancy had been spent in the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth, and we do not know how long after that it was that the marriage with Joseph took place. Had Joseph left her in Nazareth for the child to be born while he was away Mary would inevitably have been the object of insult, and possibly injury. Out of consideration for her he took her on the journey, and thus both came to the city of David. Thus it was the combination of an order of the Emperor far away on his throne in Rome and the attitude of the rude villagers at Nazareth that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, and so ensured the fulfilment of the prophecy that the Messiah would come from that city. So does God use the greatest and the least among men for the bringing of His purpose to pass.

### *The Birth of Jesus (Luke 2: 6, 7)*

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

In these simple words the most stupendous event in the history of the world is described. The Son of God was born



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as a little child. He was born, moreover, in conditions of poverty and obscurity.

Luke records nothing unusual about the birth. It was while they were in Bethlehem that "the days were accomplished" and the Child was born. He is spoken of as Mary's "firstborn son", which is worthy of comment. Luke does not say "her son", nor "her only son". "Firstborn" is most naturally understood as indicating that there were other children later. This, as we have noticed before, is also the most natural understanding of expressions like "the brethren of the Lord" which we find in other passages.

Something of the difficulties under which Mary laboured may be gathered from the narrative. There is no mention of any other women being present to help her at this difficult time. It is said that she herself dressed the Babe, and put Him in the manger. It may be that this was the result of Mary's being a stranger in Bethlehem, though as Joseph's family would have gathered, and as the impression we get from "while they were there" is that the great event did not take place immediately upon arrival, this hardly seems adequate. We may conjecture that the same forces were in operation that had induced Joseph to bring Mary with him. It was known that there was something unusual about Mary's conception; probably it was known that she was with child before marriage. Under the circumstances the women of Bethlehem may not have cared to associate themselves with her. Whether that is the reason or not, Mary's childbirth was a lonely one.

"Swaddling clothes" are bands of cloth that could be wrapped round and round. Evidently they were the usual baby clothes. Mary followed the usual procedure in wrapping the Child in such garments. The extent of her difficulties is brought out without fuss in the incidental mention that she "laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn". Mary and Joseph were unable to find accommodation in the usual places, and were in a place normally occupied by animals. So lowly did the Son of God stoop when He took our flesh upon Him!

Lu 10<sup>34</sup> The Khan has a Khan Keeper. The former did not.  
It was a caravansary.

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The language used shows that Christ was born in conditions of utter poverty, the like of which we find it difficult to envisage. The "inn" that is spoken of is not a magnificent hostelry, but a lowly place. There are two words rendered "inn" in the New Testament, and that used here is the one describing the less pretentious establishment. In Luke 22: 11 it is applied to one room (it is there translated "guest-chamber"). Possibly that is the meaning here also. It may be that Joseph had arranged to stay with a friend or relation, but when he and Mary arrived the room was already occupied. It is perhaps more likely that a lodging place for travellers is meant. But whether it was a single room, or whether it was a humble khan, even in such a lowly place there was no room.

Where they did find accommodation is a minor puzzle. Traditionally it has been held to be a stable, and that is quite likely, but a stable is never mentioned. It is a deduction from the word "manger", though not a necessary deduction. Sometimes the poor used one building to shelter both themselves and their animals. They would all be under the same roof, with the family perhaps on a raised platform while the animals were on floor level. It is possible that Mary and Joseph found shelter with such a poor family. If they were in an actual stable it may have been a building, or, as tradition from early times affirms, it may have been a cave. Caves abound in the vicinity of Bethlehem, and there is nothing improbable in the thought that the particular place where the holy family found shelter was such a cave, normally used as a stable. Moffatt translates "stall for cattle" instead of "manger" but this is probably not correct. The word is connected with a verb meaning "to eat" and it usually refers to the receptacle from which the animals took their food. Sometimes it does have the derived meaning "stall", but there seems no reason for thinking of anything other than the normal meaning of the word here. "Manger" is very appropriate.

What is certain is that Christ came to earth in circumstances as lowly as we can imagine, and far more lowly than

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we would ever have anticipated. There is pathos in the statement "there was no room for them". Had the Christ come in majesty and splendour there was not a home in Bethlehem but would have been delighted to welcome Him. But He came in lowliness and none found room for Him.

All too often we repeat the mistake. If Christ were to come to us radiant and majestic we would rejoice to welcome Him. We would give of our best to do honour to the Son of God. But He does not do that. He comes to us in the path of lowly service. We meet Him in our needy brethren. He comes in ways that we do not expect. And because He does not conform to our specifications we repeat the mistake of the Bethlehemites.

### *The Story in Matthew (Matt. 1: 24, 25)*

24 Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: 25 And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.

We may well at this point notice the way Matthew relates the same happenings. He tells the story very briefly indeed. It follows on from his account of the appearance of the angel to Joseph in a dream, telling him not to be afraid to take Mary to wife, for her conception was due to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Joseph obeyed the angel and married Mary. But Matthew points out that there were no sexual relations between them "till she had brought forth her firstborn son". In passing we should notice that the way this is put, and especially the tense used in the Greek, strongly implies that there were normal relations between them after the birth of the Child. Knox translates, "he had not known her when she bore a son". But it is more than doubtful whether the Greek can possibly bear this meaning (or, for that matter, the Latin from which Knox is primarily translating). The imperfect is a continuous tense and the meaning is, "he used not to know her until she bore a son". Our text reads "firstborn son", but the adjective should probably be



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omitted, as not being in the most ancient manuscripts. Matthew proceeds to record Joseph's obedience in the matter of the name, and so concludes his narrative. Plainly he is not interested in the details, and is content to record the fact.

It may not be out of place to record that the date of all this is not known. The year would have been the early years B.C. (our calendar makers erred slightly). We know that Christ was born before the death of Herod, and that took place in 4 B.C. If the year is uncertain, even more so is the day and the month. We celebrate the birth of Christ on 25th December, but the first record of this day being observed is at ✓ Rome in A.D. 354. It was observed in Constantinople in 379 and in Antioch in 388 (or perhaps slightly before), and in time the observance became general. Why this particular date was chosen we do not know. It has been suggested that it was partly, at least, with a view to displacing a pagan festival held at that time. Another suggestion rests on what seems to us the curious idea that Christ must have been on earth for an exact number of years. Fractions were regarded as imperfect. Therefore it was impossible that they could have a place in His life. It was widely (and almost certainly erroneously) held that the crucifixion occurred on March 25th). The incarnation must therefore (so the reasoning runs) have taken place on March 25th. As the incarnation dates from the moment of conception, the actual birth would have been on December 25th.

Whatever the reasoning behind the choice of this day, the earliest recorded date of the observance is obviously so far removed from the events commemorated as to be worthless when we are trying to determine the exact date. The indications in the narrative are not precise enough to help us. It is improbable that December is the right month, for shepherds are not likely to have been camped out at that season of the year (though this is not impossible). But we do not seem to have any means of working out the right month. Some scholar or other has advocated almost every month of the year! It is obvious that we must be content to remain in ignorance in the matter.

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### *The Message to the Shepherds* (Luke 2: 8-14)

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Shepherds in the ancient world were a despised people. The nature of their calling took them away from the habitations of men, and all too often it seems to have taken them away from the standards accepted by ordinary men, too. They had an unfortunate habit of confusing "thine" with "mine". They were frequently on the move as they attended their animals, and this may have helped make them somewhat careless in such matters. Whatever the reason, they were notoriously light-fingered. So badly were they regarded that there was a legal regulation which would not allow the evidence of a shepherd to be heard in court.

I do not suggest that there was anything amiss with this particular group of shepherds. Indeed, since God chose to send His angel to them with the news of the birth of the Messiah, we may fairly infer that they were devout men, genuinely seeking to serve their God. But they belonged to a class of despised persons, a class for which most people could not find a good word. Here again we see how little God regards men's opinions. Our Lord came in conditions of great humility. His first visitors were from a class of men held in universal disregard.

The shepherds were camped out as they watched their flocks. There were wild animals in Judæa and flocks had to be protected. Usually this was done by driving them into a sheep-fold, a building protected by walls, but open to the sky

(Jesus speaks of such a fold in John 10). However, if the sheep were far from home such a procedure would be impracticable, and then the shepherds took turns in watching over them through the night. This is what Luke tells us they were doing on the night the Lord was born. "Keeping watch" is literally "guarding guards", which is probably a way of saying that they were keeping watch by turns.

While they were engaged in this task an angel came upon them. On previous angel visits recorded in this Gospel the name of the angel is given, but this time we simply read of "an angel of the Lord" (there is no article in the Greek). There was also a visible manifestation of God's glory, for "the glory of the Lord shone round about them". The same word "glory" is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the manifestation of the divine presence. When the angel came there was some visible representation of the divine splendour which showed that God was near. The natural reaction of these simple folk was that "they were terribly frightened" (Goodspeed). They were not used to this kind of thing, and nothing in their previous experience had taught them how to behave in such a situation.

The first words of the angel messenger to them were "Fear not". We have noticed this tender concern before. Each of the angelic visitors began by reassuring the object of his message. This angel goes on immediately to the object of his visit. "There is no need for you to be afraid, for I have come, not to terrify you, but to bring you some very good news" is the sense of his words. As in 1: 19 the word for "bring good tidings" is that which later became the technical word for "preach the gospel". It indicates that the news was the best possible, a veritable gospel. This is underlined with the added reference to "great joy". Nothing is as joyous as the news that God has sent His Son. "Which shall be to all people" is better "to all the people". The word "people" is that which is usually used of the people of God, the Jewish nation, and not that which is employed of the Gentiles. While we need not doubt that the Christian message from the first has had its application to all men it is not this which



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is being stressed here. The angel is telling the shepherds that the good news is something that is not for them only, but for the whole nation. The Jews had been looking for the Messiah, and now their Messiah had come.

The good news is that of the birth of the infant Jesus. The angel speaks of him as "a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord". This needs to be stressed strongly. These are days when the message of Christmas is understood to be one of good fellowship, of general mirth and jollity. Most people unhesitatingly think of "peace on earth, good will toward men" as the authentic note of Christmas. This, as we shall see, is not the right understanding of verse 14, but putting that aside for a moment, the real message of Christmas is given here. It is that a Saviour has been born. It is that this Saviour is none less than Christ the Lord. Christmas is the story of the way God took action to deal with men's sin. It is salvation that is at the centre of it, for Bethlehem leads right on to Calvary. Christ came not to create a certain amount of good will among men but to die for men's sin.

"Christ the Lord" speaks of the dignity of the Child who had just been born. "Christ" means "Messiah". It reminds us that this child was the one that the Jews had been looking for with eager and passionate longing. The tragedy was that they had so made up their minds what sort of being He would be that they could not recognize Him when He did not conform to their expectations. We are warned to take our theology from the Lord, and not from our own human expectations.

The angel proceeds to give the shepherds a sign. There is no article with "babe" so that we should read "you will find a babe". In preparing this study I consulted a couple of learned commentaries. One of them said, in effect, "The sign was a sign that what was said was true. It was not a way of letting the shepherds know how to find the right Child". The other took the opposite position, "The sign was so that the shepherds would know the Child. They would not need a sign that what the angel said was true". So there it is. The authorities disagree. Obviously there is nothing which

puts the point beyond doubt, but I should think the former is more likely to be right than the latter. It should not have been terribly difficult to find a newborn Babe in a place the size of Bethlehem. But the angel assures them that the unusual circumstances (finding Him in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger) would confirm them in the knowledge that what he had said was true.

At this point there was a sudden appearance of "a multitude of the heavenly host". The throng of angels were praising God, and the content of their song is given. The first part is an ascription of glory to God, and this ought not to be overlooked. I have pointed out that many people think of the Christmas message in terms of "peace on earth, good will toward men". They ought to be reminded that, even if this were the correct version, it is preceded by "Glory to God in the highest". The Scripture is clear on its priorities. There never will in fact be peace on earth and good will towards men until glory is given to God in the highest. One reason why there is so little peace and good will among men today is that there is so little giving glory to God. We are so wrapped up in our own concerns that we leave God out. It is not surprising accordingly that peace and good will are commodities in somewhat short supply.

The rest of the message is difficult, but almost certainly "on earth peace, good will toward men" is wrong. The words in the better manuscripts are "on earth peace among men of good pleasure". The question is, Whose is this good pleasure? Rieu translates, "peace in men of good will". This is a possible understanding of the words, but not, I think, a very likely one, though it appeals to men today. They like to think of the message as giving a high place to a certain kind of man. But this puts an emphasis on man, whereas the Scriptural emphasis is on God. So in this text I think that the "good pleasure" that is meant is not man's good pleasure but God's (so Goodspeed, "peace to the men he favours"). In other words the angel is proclaiming that God has sent His Son to be a Saviour. He is giving glory to God in the highest, and assuring the shepherds that there

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would be peace now to those on whom God has set His good pleasure. Since He has sent His Son to be their Saviour clearly they have nothing to fear. Peace, of course, is peace in the fullest sense. It stands for the complete prosperity of the whole man, with a special emphasis on his spiritual prosperity.

### *The Shepherds Visit the Christ (Luke 2: 15, 16)*

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

The angels completed their message, and returned to their place. The excited shepherds determined to go and see the Babe, as the first angel had suggested. There is a sense of urgency about "Let us now go" in the Greek, as though to say "Let us do it at once, without the slightest delay" (cf. Moffatt, "Let us be off to Bethlehem . . ."). They did not doubt for a moment, for they spoke of "this thing which is come to pass". And they recognized truly the source of their knowledge. The Lord Himself had made it known to them.

So they came with eager haste. We can almost discern something of the breathlessness with which they had greeted the angel's message, and now acted on it. And they found the holy family, just as it had been told them. Luke repeats the detail of "the babe lying in a manger".

### *The Result of the Shepherds' Visit (Luke 2: 17-20)*

17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and



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praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Not surprisingly, the shepherds spread abroad the news of what had happened. What a story it must have made! Angels had visited them. They had seen the glory of the Lord. They had had news of a Babe in unusual circumstances. They had seen the heavenly host and heard them praising God. They had gone to the village and found the situation just what the angel had told them. So they told people what the angel had said to them about this Child. And their story had the desired effect. The hearers "were struck with amazement". The verb has something of the single action about it, so that it does not mean that they kept on wondering, though that is probably true.

There is a contrast in the case of Mary. "But" sets her over against them. She did not react as did they. She would not have been astonished. Why should she? She had had an angel visitor long before, and what he had told her was so wonderful that all this could only be the natural sequel to it. There is also a contrast in the tense of the verb. Just as the previous verb means "were struck with amazement", pointing to a single action, so "kept" is in a continuous tense, "kept on keeping" if we could put it that way. She had not been astonished at the news, but she valued it. So she remembered the things the shepherds said. She lost none of them. Moreover, she reflected on their significance. She "pondered them in her heart".

This section of the narrative concludes with a picture of the shepherds returning to their flocks "glorifying and praising God" as they went. Rieu renders the following words, "for the news they had heard and the sight that had confirmed it". They were obviously deeply impressed with the correspondence between what they had seen and what they had been told by the angels.

One further point of speculation about the shepherds may be added. It is possible, even likely, that shepherds near Bethlehem would be tending flocks which would be used for

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the sacrifices offered in the temple. If this is so, and if the shepherds were as voluble at Jerusalem as they were at Bethlehem, they may well have played a part in preparing Simeon and Anna for the Christ child.

We have looked today at the most beautiful story ever told, the story of the astonishing way in which God sent His Son to be born on earth. There was no fanfare of trumpets, nothing to attract the attention of the worldly wise. In lowliness and humility He came, in poverty and rejection. The only touch of splendour was a manifestation of God's glory to the Christ child's first visitors. And they were despised shepherds.

Now it is easy to become sentimental about all this, and many of us do. We like the romance of the Great One coming in obscurity. Being humble and unimportant people ourselves, we like to think of the earth's mighty and important being by-passed as God's great gift came to a peasant family. The story of angels appearing to lowly shepherds never fails in its appeal. In this spirit we sing our carols and send our Christmas cards. And if we need anything else for a good Christmas observance we find it in a general demand for good will and good cheer.

Now this is sheer misinterpretation of the essential meaning of Christmas. Christmas basically has little to do with sentimentality and romance. It does not find expression in an irrational good fellowship that temporarily lays aside its grudges it knows not why. The essential point about Christmas is that God sent His Son to be our *Saviour*. God took action to deal with the sin of the world. We do well at Christmas to reflect on the fact of our sin and the seriousness of our sin. It was this that brought the Son of God to Bethlehem's manger. It is this that Christmas is all about.

This does not mean that I object to good will and mutual forbearance being shown especially at this time of the year. Let there be all the good fellowship there can be! But let it be soundly based. We should show good will towards men, not from motives of fuzzy sentimentality, but because we are

men who have been lived and died for. If we give serious attention to what we owe to God, to the fact that our sin had left us without resource, to our complete helplessness and hopelessness apart from what God has done for us, we will certainly face our fellow-men without pride and without malice. Our outlook on others will be shaped by what God has done for us. Knowing what we have deserved, and how we have been forgiven in Christ, we will not be nourishing grudges.

In other words there is reason for good fellowship and good will at Christmas time. But there is a right and a wrong kind of fellowship. It is easy to manifest a cheap and spurious, though outwardly hearty, good will to others. But it is better to face our God and our sin and what our God has done about our sin, and only in the light of all this to face our fellows.



## CHAPTER SIX

### THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

(Luke 2: 21-40)

#### *The Circumcision* (Luke 2: 21)

21 And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

THIS incident stresses the connection between the new covenant and the old. Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, submits to circumcision, the rite of admission to the old covenant. Circumcision was practised by a number of peoples in antiquity. For Israel its significance was determined by the words of the Lord to Abraham, "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man-child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you" (Gen. 17: 10 f.). The same passage goes on to command that the rite be carried out on the eighth day, and that "the uncircumcised man-child, whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant". From that time on it was the invariable rite of admission to the covenant that God made with His people.

Paul the Christian looks at circumcision somewhat differently. He tells us that, "if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing", and he goes on, "For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is debtor to do the whole law" (Gal. 5: 2 f.). After Christ has come, and

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died for our salvation, to go back to circumcision is to go back on what Christ has done for men. It is to place oneself outside the new covenant, and to seek admission to the old. It is to forsake the way of grace, and to choose the way of law.

The circumcision of Christ comes between these two. It was fitting that He who was to bring about men's salvation should make Himself one with men. So He submitted Himself to the requirements of the divine law, that same law under which God's people were then living. He perfectly fulfilled that law. He was "made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4: 4 f.). Here is that initial act of compliance with the law's demands that was to lead to all the rest. Plummer remarks that "His circumcision was a first step in His obedience to the will of God, and a first shedding of the redeeming blood".

When we were dealing with the naming of John the Baptist we noticed that the evidence seems to show that naming was carried out in conjunction with the ceremony of circumcision. So on this occasion the Child was named on the eighth day. In telling us that He was named "Jesus" Luke reminds us that this was the name given by the angel before ever He was conceived in the womb. The name "God is Saviour" which points so clearly to the new was linked with the ceremony of admission to the old.

### *The Presentation to the Lord* (Luke 2: 22-24)

22 And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; 23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) 24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.

According to the Levitical law the mother who gave birth to a child was "unclean" (ceremonially defiled) for a period of seven days leading up to the circumcision of a male child,

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and for a further thirty-three days thereafter, making a total of forty days (in the case of a girl both periods were doubled; see Lev. 12: 1-5). The period of uncleanness was ended by the offering of prescribed sacrifices. When the text speaks of "the days of her purification" it is this period of forty days that is meant. We should notice, though, that the majority of the better manuscripts read "their" and not "her" purification. It is likely that some scribe did not like the thought of our Lord as ever being in any way defiled, and so altered the reading. For the same reason that the alteration appealed to him it appealed to later scribes, and so "her" appears in most of the later manuscripts.

It seems clear that we should read "their", but not so clear whom we should understand this to mean. If it refers to Mary and her Babe, then the Child is thought of as in some way sharing in the uncleanness associated with the birth. This would then represent a further stage in the identification of Christ with His people. It would mean that when He came to earth He did not shrink from the ultimate in becoming one with those for whom He came to die: He shared their uncleanness. But it is not at all certain that "their" does mean Mary and Jesus. The text runs "when the days of their purification . . . were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem. . . ." "They" must mean Mary and Joseph. It cannot include Jesus, for "they brought him". Grammatically "their" and "they" should refer to the same people. If this line of reasoning be followed, as I think it should, then Joseph is thought of as somehow contracting ceremonial defilement from his wife. In the case of people situated as they were this would not only be easy but almost inevitable. But when she was "purified" the way would be open for him to be purified also. They would offer the prescribed sacrifices, and resume their places in the worshipping community.

So when the time was come "they brought him to Jerusalem". Actually the verb means "brought him up", which is of interest because Bethlehem is actually higher than Jerusalem, so they had to go down to the place. Luke is



following the common practice of referring to a journey to the capital as going "up". The reason for bringing Jesus up to Jerusalem is that they might "present him to the Lord".

This is supported by an appeal to Scripture. Luke tells us that "it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord". The difficulty here is that there is no passage in the Old Testament that says exactly this. Exod. 13: 2 is rather like it, "Sanctify unto me all the first-born, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine." Exod. 13: 12 is rather like it, "thou shalt set apart unto the Lord all that openeth the matrix . . . the males shall be the Lord's". Num. 18: 15 is rather like it, "Everything that openeth the matrix in all flesh, which they bring unto the Lord, whether it be of men or beasts, shall be thine: nevertheless the first-born of man shalt thou surely redeem. . . ." But none of them is exactly it. This is a problem that we meet quite often in the New Testament, and it may be well to say a few words about it.

One possibility is that the writer is quoting loosely from memory and is not looking up the text. To look up a text such as any of the three we have just noticed would not be very easy. Books were not divided into chapters and verses for easy reference as with us. Books were in roll form, and not the form with pages which is so convenient to handle. If the manuscript were a Greek one there would probably be no punctuation, no spaces would be left between words (why waste valuable space?), and all the letters would be capitals. The book would be written as one great long word! If the manuscript was a Hebrew one the vowels would have been left out, and one would have to read from the consonants alone. You can imagine the difficulty of looking for a text somewhere in the middle of a book as long as Exodus or Numbers, with its unrolling of the roll to just the right place, and the search for the right words. If you wished to quote a small text, a line and a half or something of the sort, and if you were not wishing to put emphasis on the exact words, but just wanted the general drift of the passage, and if you

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had the gist of it running in your head, then it would probably seem to you not worth the trouble of hunting up the place. Very often in antiquity quotations are made in this fashion. This does not imply some low doctrine of inspiration. There seems no reason why the Spirit of God should not sometimes guide men to write in this way when what He wanted them to write was in no way dependent on the exact words of the original. And the evidence goes to show that this, in fact, was what He did do.

Other possibilities arise from the fact that people depended on written manuscripts and not on printed books. When each copy was laboriously made by hand every copy was different in some ways from every other one. It is always possible that a writer may be quoting from a manuscript of a type that is not known to us, it having perished with the overwhelming majority of writings. When it is a matter of a quotation in Greek from a Hebrew original there is always the possibility of variant translations (just as we have many modern translations of the New Testament differing slightly from one another, though agreeing in general sense). In this particular case there is no reason to suspect that either of the latter two possibilities is in operation. The probability is that the evangelist is quoting loosely from memory.

It was not necessary for every child to be brought to Jerusalem to the temple (though we may be sure that parents who lived close enough would delight to do this). But he would be ceremonially presented to God, and he would be ransomed for the sum of five shekels as it is prescribed in Num. 18: 15, 16. So on this occasion Joseph and Mary presented the child Jesus in the temple, and, though it is not mentioned, doubtless they paid the five shekels.

Just as the presentation mentioned in verses 22 f. had to do with the Child, so the offering of the sacrifices mentioned in verse 24 concerned the mother. It was the offering of purification, which enabled her to return to normal religious life after her childbirth. The sacrifice is prescribed in Lev. 12: 6-8. There we read that, after the period prescribed for purifying has elapsed, the mother is to offer "a lamb of the

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first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtle-dove, for a sin offering". But it is also provided that "if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons". I do not think there is any significance in the alternatives, pigeons and turtle-doves. A naturalist has pointed out that the turtle-dove is a migratory bird, and can be obtained only at certain seasons, whereas the pigeon is found in Palestine throughout the year. He also notes that Scripture mentions specifically "young" pigeons. He comments that turtle-doves can be caught without much difficulty even when they are mature. Not so pigeons. They acquire cunning, and if they are caught at all it must be while they are still young and innocent. This may be so, but it hardly matters for our present purpose. The offering by Mary of doves or pigeons arises from her poverty, but it is difficult to be sure of just how much it proves. Some suggest that it is a proof that the incident took place before the visit of the Wise Men, for after that Mary would be in the position to offer a lamb. That may be so, but it is countered by others who say that the lamb was not offered by ordinary people. It was the offering only of the very rich. I would not like to give an opinion on this. I should think that the offering in the temple is likely to have been before the visit of the Wise Men, for Joseph and Mary would probably have avoided Jerusalem after hearing about Herod. For the rest, Joseph and Mary were certainly poor, so that inevitably their offering was the offering of the poor.

### *The Aged Simeon (Luke 2: 25, 26)*

25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. 26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Attempts have been made to identify the Simeon mentioned here with a great Rabbi of the same name, and



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indeed with various other people as well. I rather think that this is a waste of time. Simeon was one of the commonest of Jewish names. It cannot be maintained that because this man was named Simeon, and because we read of a person called Simeon of about this time, therefore both are the same. It does not follow, as we would see in a moment if we translated it to modern times. Because you know a man called Jack living in Melbourne, and I know a man called Jack living in Melbourne, it does not follow that they are the same (it would not even follow if they both had a name like "Leon"! ). We do not know anything more about Simeon than we read in this place. He is usually thought of as an old man, an opinion I adopt, though it should be noted that Luke does not expressly say this. It is a deduction from his readiness to depart this life, mentioned in verse 29.

Luke tells us four things about him. He was "just", which means that his life was conformed to the law of God. Day by day he sought to live according to the precepts that God had given to men. He was "devout", which fastens attention particularly on his religious life. He not only sought to live uprightly in his relations with others, he was faithful to his religious obligations.

The third thing that Luke tells us is that Simeon waited "for the consolation of Israel". This is a way of referring to the messianic hope. It was expected among the Jews that before the Messiah came there would be widespread trouble. "The woes of the Messiah" was an expression in common use to indicate the sufferings that would come upon the people before the great day. One of the functions that the Messiah would discharge would be to smooth away these troubles, and so to "console" the nation. Thus "the consolation of Israel" passed into the language as a regular expression for the coming of the Messiah.

The final point is that "the Holy Ghost was upon him". What form this took is not specified. In the Old Testament the Holy Ghost was responsible for a variety of things, the skill of the craftsman Bezaleel, the strength of Samson, the

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message of the prophets, and much more. In the New Testament the Spirit comes upon all who put their trust in the Lord Jesus, giving them strength not their own which enables them to overcome in the fight against evil. Christian virtues are thought of as the result of the Spirit's indwelling, and not simply as the believer's own achievement. But Simeon stands between the two, and it is not easy to see exactly what is meant by the expression. But at least it signifies that the divine presence was constantly with the old man. We are probably to understand the expression as pointing to the reality and the depth of his communion with God. There is an unusual word order, "and the Spirit was holy upon him". There is no doubt that "holy" goes with "Spirit", but the unusual order has the effect of emphasizing the holiness.

To this man it had been revealed that he would see the Christ before he died. How this revelation took place we do not know. The word translated "revealed" is interesting. Originally it meant "to do business". Now if you do business, more than one thing happens. One is that you become known, you get a name. Thus the word comes to mean "to receive a name", "to be called". It is sometimes used this way in the New Testament. But also in business, especially public business, you are called upon to answer questions. The word came to be used accordingly of giving official replies. In the religious world it was habitually employed for the reply given when an oracle was consulted—for example, at Delphi. Thus it was used regularly for a divine communication, which, of course, is the significance here. But it is not confined to communications made in any particular way, and thus it does not help us understand the manner in which the Holy Spirit conveyed the truth to Simeon. All that we know is that He did convey this truth to him, so that the old man was quietly expecting to see the Messiah.

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### *The Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2: 27-32)

27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, 28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Simeon came into the temple (the word is the wider one, used of the whole temple with all its precincts, and not the narrower one signifying the sanctuary) "in" rather than "by" the Spirit. The Greek implies a little more than that he was guided by the Spirit, though that is included. It is like the "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" of Rev. 1: 10. The thought of close fellowship with the Spirit, or awareness of the Spirit's nearness, is included.

He was there when "the parents" had brought Jesus in. The use of this expression inclines some people to think that Luke is here using a source different from that in the previous chapter, and one which knows nothing of the Virgin conception. But this is going too far. Luke could hardly keep on using expressions like "the mother and Joseph". Such a way of speaking would be very cumbersome. Luke has made it very clear that the birth of Jesus took place in miraculous fashion, without the intervention of a human father. Having said this he does not have to repeat it at frequent intervals. Joseph stood in the place of a parent, and exercised the duties of a parent. Joseph and Mary appeared in the temple in the capacity of parents. They came to do what the law laid down that parents should do. It was an easy and natural thing accordingly to refer briefly to "parents" without thereby meaning to deny what had been written earlier.

Simeon took the child into his arms. The Greek is "he too", which indicates, as we would have expected, that the parents had Him in their arms first, and then Simeon took him, too. He "blessed God", which we have seen before means that he uttered a prayer of thanksgiving. Such prayers



usually began, "Blessed art thou, O Lord". Hence to "bless" God meant much the same as to "thank" God, even though the actual prayer might not contain the word "bless". In this case "bless" does not occur in the prayer, which may mean that the verb is being employed in its conventional sense. Alternatively, the conventional opening may be understood by all and therefore omitted in writing down the prayer.

The words of Simeon's thanksgiving form another beautiful little poem. It has passed into the language of Christian devotion, and it is used regularly, for example, by Anglicans in their service of Evening Prayer. Here may an Anglican plaintively inquire, Why, oh why, do we so often sing it to a mournful chant? In most of our churches it seems to be accepted that this should be sung solemnly, slowly, with dull and mournful dignity. On Simeon's lips it was not a gloomy song, but a pæon of praise. This was his supreme moment, the moment for which he had been looking for years, the moment that the Spirit had told him would come, the greatest moment of his life. He was singing out of the fullness of a heart overflowing with gratitude and joy. It would be a great gain if we could learn to sing this canticle imaginatively, with the lively joy that actuated its inspired author.

The imagery of the song is that of a slave appointed by his master to watch for the rising of a star, and to report when it appears. The rising is slow in coming. The vigil is long. But at length the star does appear. Joyfully the slave announces its appearance, and gives thanks for two things. The one is for the star itself. It is a beautiful star and he rejoices over it. The other is for the ending of his prolonged time of waiting. It has not been easy, and he is glad it is over.

With this imagery in mind the old saint sings. The song in Greek begins, not with "Lord" as in English, but with "Now". This emphasizes the realization of Simeon's dream. "Now, at last it has happened" is the force of it. "Lord" is a somewhat unusual word in this kind of context. This in fact is the only place in any of the four Gospels where it is found. Rieu tries to bring out something of its unusual

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nature by rendering "my Sovran Lord", while Knox has "Ruler of all". Properly it denotes a master of slaves, and used in this way of God it stresses God's absolute rights over His people. In keeping with this the word for "servant" is one meaning "slave". It is the natural correlative to that used of "Lord". Simeon takes the lowly place and recognizes God's supreme place.

He asks that he may now be dismissed in peace. "In peace" comes at the very end with a certain emphasis. He has waited a long time, and he longs to leave this world. Evidently he was very old. So he prays that he may depart "in peace" and "according to thy word". He looks for the blessing of the Lord to attend his passing. He reminds God of His promise, and looks to see that promise fulfilled.

The reason for this is given in verse 30, "For mine eyes have seen thy salvation". This is what he has been waiting for. Now that he has set his eyes on the Messiah there is nothing more for him to live for. Just as Simeon had an unusual word for "Lord" so he has another for "salvation". It is not really a noun at all, but the neuter of the adjective used as a noun (this is done in only three other passages in the New Testament). The use of the neuter has the effect of making the statement somewhat indefinite. That is to say, Simeon is not affirming that he knows precisely how God is to effect the salvation of which he sings. He is not going into details, for he does not know them. But he does know that the salvation will be achieved in some way by the Child that he has just taken into his arms. The word means, "that which is fitted to save", "the means of salvation". As Godet points out, it is not the same as "Saviour", nor as "Salvation", but rather it signifies, "the means of deliverance".

This salvation Simeon speaks of as having been "prepared". Here is the familiar thought that in Jesus Christ there was God's new act, but it was not an act newly decided upon. Again and again Luke has used expressions reminding us that God has prepared His plans from of old. So now Simeon repeats the thought. "Before the face of all people" is really

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"before the face of all the peoples" (Rieu, "for all nations to behold"). It brings the note of the universal into the thought of salvation. It is not something that God has done without reference to all mankind. He has prepared it, but "with a view to all". He had in mind the needs of the whole race of men.

The little song concludes by referring to this salvation as "a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel". It is noteworthy that Simeon, an aged and loyal Jew, should put the Gentiles before the chosen race in this way. At that time the Jews for the most part were intensely nationalistic. They reacted to their subjection and humiliation at the hand of the Romans with a fierce hatred for the Gentiles and all their works. They looked for the coming of a kingdom wherein the Jews would be supreme and the Gentiles would exist only to serve them. But Simeon is a man full of the Holy Spirit. He is not interested in the passions of a narrow nationalism. He looks for God to work out His purposes for the benefit of all mankind.

Though his general drift is clear, his exact meaning is difficult. The expression is literally "a light for a revelation of Gentiles" and it is the bearing of "of Gentiles" which is the problem. It could mean that the revelation would belong to the Gentiles. In Simeon's day men thought of the Old Testament as the sacred Scripture of the Jews. It belonged to them. That this new revelation belongs to the Gentiles, might be the meaning of the term. Or "a revelation of Gentiles" might be understood as "an instructing of Gentiles". In this case the salvation that was about to come would be the means of bringing the Gentiles out of darkness. It would be a light to them. It would show them the truth of God. Or, thirdly, the expression might mean, as the margin of the Revised Version puts it, "a light for the unveiling of the Gentiles". That is, the light would take away the light which concealed the Gentiles, and show them for what they really are. All of these are true, and each is possible. My own preference is for the first, though somewhat hesitantly.



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With that Simeon couples "the glory of thy people Israel". The revelation to the Gentiles will mean no loss to Israel, but rather great gain. It will be "the glory" of Israel. We are reminded of one of the fundamental Christian truths, that what we hold firmly we lose, and what we give we really have. Our Lord later said that "whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it" (Luke 9: 24). That truth is foreshadowed here.

### *A Prophecy for Mary* (Luke 2: 33-35)

33 And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. 34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; 35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Some have suggested that if the earlier stories of the angel visits to Mary and Joseph be accepted their marvelling at this is inexplicable. This does not follow, for what Simeon said went far beyond anything that the angel had said. The angel had spoken of the Child, and explained His conception, but Simeon, under the guidance of the Spirit, spoke of great salvation that He would accomplish.

Then he blessed them (i.e. Mary and Joseph), and went on to utter a special prophecy to Mary. First he speaks of the Child as being set (i.e. "appointed"; there is the thought of the divine plan once more) for the "fall and rising again of many in Israel". There is a great principle involved here. Men cannot rise, except from a lowly place. Those who think they stand are set for a fall. Actually no man has reason for "standing" before God, but there are many who firmly believe that they are upright in His sight. Before such can be saved it is necessary that they should "fall", that they should come to realize their true position in God's sight. Only then can they "rise again". The word "rising again" is that usually translated "resurrection" in the New Testament.

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The spiritual change of which Simeon speaks is a veritable resurrection from a state of death to newness of life. But these words do not mean that all who fall in this way will rise again to salvation. Some do, and we have the classic example in this very Gospel in the story of the Pharisee and the publican. The man who was justified was the man who "smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18: 13). It is this realization of one's completely lost state and utter helplessness that is the prelude to the "rising again" of which Simeon speaks.

But others do not. The words set before us the classes of those who fall and those who rise again. Always there are those two classes. A Peter will grieve and repent and be restored. A Judas will grieve and suffer remorse and hang himself. Falling does not necessarily lead to rising, though it is the necessary prelude to it. There is a solemnity and an importance about the spiritual decisions that we make. We cannot just sit back and expect all these things to work out all right for us. Scripture is insistent on the reality of the spiritual choice that faces men, and on the seriousness of the decision they make. Moffatt brings out the division into two classes by his translation, "This child is destined for the downfall as well as for the rise of many a one in Israel".

"A sign which shall be spoken against" is capable of being understood in more ways than one. It might mean a sign which provokes discussion, a sign which will stimulate men to thinking and to taking sides. The other way is to understand the words simply of the opposition that Christ would meet. I think this latter is correct. Simeon prophesies that, though Jesus has the glorious destiny he has outlined in his song, He will not be universally welcomed. There will be those who oppose Him. It is a mournful reflection on mankind that there are always those who oppose good.

Simeon has also a prophecy for Mary herself. "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also." There are two Greek words for "sword" and that used here is the one for the great broadsword. It is a symbol of great distress.

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"Soul" here stands for Mary's innermost being. The prophecy is that she will undergo a very great sorrow. "Thine own soul" makes it very personal. Simeon has been speaking of the opposition that the Christ would have. But sorrow would not be confined to Him. Mary would suffer in His suffering.

"That the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" brings us to another theme which is worked out in the Gospels, namely the impossibility of neutrality in moral issues. We may seek to be neutral, but in matters of right and wrong it is impossible. Unless we actively aid the right our attitude says, "As far as I am concerned the wrong may triumph". We have given some measure of assistance to the wrong. So when the Christ should suffer, and Mary should find distress in her innermost soul, it will be revealed on whose side men choose to place themselves. Their thoughts are secret. They are hid in their "hearts". But when Christ is on the cross their attitude betrays them. Then they are for Him or against Him. Ultimately there is no possibility of neutrality where He is concerned.

### *The Prophetess Anna (Luke 2: 36-38)*

36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; 37 And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. 38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

There is not much to be said about this little incident. In view of the fact that Asher was one of the "lost" ten tribes it is interesting to see that Anna was known to be from this tribe. The reference to her age is puzzling. One would naturally understand the words of verse 37 to indicate that she had been a widow for eighty-four years, were it not that that would make her a very old lady indeed. Add the seven



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years of her married life, and the years before she was married and her age becomes more than impressive. For this reason many understand the words to mean that she was in all eighty-four years old, and that she had had only seven years of married life. Either way she was very aged.

She was obviously very devout. When Luke says that she "departed not from the temple" he may mean that she had quarters somewhere within the temple precincts. But the words need not necessarily imply more than that she was incessantly at the temple, that she "never missed a service" whether it was held by day or night. Her earnestness is brought out with the reference to her "fastings and prayers". She did not live a self-indulgent life. She was in the custom of disciplining the flesh and being constantly in prayer.

Anna came in at that moment. This may mean she was in time to hear Simeon's words. Whether that was so or not, she knew who the Child was, and gave thanks to God. She went on to speak of the Child to "all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem". We have no knowledge of what she said, but as she was a prophetess we may believe that she, like Simeon, gave vent to an inspired utterance, setting forth something of the significance of the events that were happening.

### *The Return to Nazareth (Luke 2: 39, 40)*

39 And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth.

40 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.

There are many problems of chronology here, for Luke appears to mean that the holy family went from Jerusalem direct to Nazareth, whereas Matthew tells us of a flight to Egypt. It is possible that this flight took place before the visit to Jerusalem, but more likely that it followed it, and that Luke has simply omitted all mention of it. It may not have been in his source, or it may not have been relevant to his purpose.

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He tells us that Mary and Joseph complied fully with all the requirements of the law, and that they took up their abode in Nazareth, their own city. Verse 40 is a reminder of the very human development of our Lord. Throughout the passages we have studied in this chapter we have many reminders of His divinity, particularly in the work He was to accomplish. But Scripture will not let us rest with a Christ who was only divine, nor with one who was only human. The two are both insisted upon, and the words which close our portion bring out the development of Jesus as He grew, just as 1: 80 has stressed that of John.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE WISE MEN

(Matt. 2: 1-23)

#### *The Quest of the Wise Men* (Matt. 2: 1, 2)

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, 2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

**T**RADITION and legend have been busy about the figures of the Wise Men. Thus they are usually held to have been three in number, though we have no information at all on the subject. They brought three gifts, and that is, I suppose, the information on which the tradition is based. But there is no reason why each of the visitors should not have brought more than one gift, or why more than one of them should not have brought the same gift, or why the gifts mentioned should not have been a joint offering. The number of gifts really gives no information at all as to the number of the men. As we have no other way of determining the question we must be content to remain in ignorance. Legend makes the visitors kings. This is unlikely for obvious reasons. The Bible narrative gives us no information at all as to their station in life.

Sometimes people speak about them today as the "Magi" instead of using the traditional term "Wise Men". "Magi" is our attempt at reproducing the original: it is not a translation. The reason for using it is the very great difficulty of finding a satisfactory English equivalent. "Wise Men" does not fill the bill, for with us the term signifies wisdom in



general, whereas the Greek term is specific. It denotes people who made a close study of the stars and related studies. This suggests to us "astronomers", a term which is invalidated because their studies were not astronomy in our sense of the term. They held that the stars influenced human actions and destiny, and in some of their deductions were akin to astrologers. Indeed, Goodspeed translates "astrologers". But this may be doing them an injustice. With us astrologers are people who peddle petty superstitions, and the best, at any rate, of the Magi rose above this. Some today take the astrologers seriously, and more think of them as nothing but a joke. But nobody regards them as serious scientists. But the Magi at their best were just that. Their science was of a very rudimentary kind, and we must not look for results, or even methods, quite like those of modern scientists. It was widely held in their day that planets were not simply heavenly bodies moving in fixed orbits, but that they were powers exercising influences baleful or benign on the lives of men. The Magi fully accepted such beliefs. It was for this reason that they set themselves to close study of the heavens. But with all their strange ideas they acquired a good deal of factual knowledge of the movements of the stars and this is the justification for calling them "scientists". But we cannot call them the scientists of their day and let it go at that. Their studies had a religious aspect. I suppose it would be just as correct (and incorrect) to call them the theologians as the scientists of their world.

Most of the Magi were closely associated with superstitious practices (the very name is from the same root as our word "magic"! ). Some scholars suggest accordingly that we should understand the term here in a bad sense, and think of these Magi as charlatans. They point out that Magi are mentioned in only two other passages in the New Testament, namely Acts 8 (Simon) and Acts 13 (Elymas), and both times the word is understood in a bad sense. If this is the right way of looking at it, then the present passage is to be understood as indicating that these magicians had been convicted of the error of their ways. They come to worship

before the "King of the Jews", bringing gifts: gold, from their ill-gotten gains, symbolizes renunciation of their illicit profits, while frankincense and myrrh, which were commonly used in incantations, symbolize the surrender of all their magic-making paraphernalia. In the words of Ignatius, "A star shone forth in the heaven above all the stars; and its light was unutterable. . . . From that time forward every sorcery and every spell was dissolved . . ." (*ad. Eph.* 19: 2; Lightfoot's translation).

I do not think that such an understanding of the passage can be quite ruled out. But it does not seem to me to be what Matthew meant. There is not a word of blame applied to these men anywhere. A straightforward reading of the chapter indicates that they are being given approval. Whatever may have been the case with other Magi, these appear to have been sincere men earnestly seeking to find and do the will of God. Moreover, they were prepared to act on the knowledge of God that they had. They did not sit down at home commenting on how interesting it was that the King of the Jews was to be born. They left their homes and made a lengthy and arduous journey to see Him.

The time of their journey is given as "when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king". From the later statement that Herod slew all the children in Bethlehem under two years of age we can see that "when Jesus was born" does not mean right on the day of the event. It indicates loosely the general period. There is no reason why it should not allow for the visit to Jerusalem we considered in our last study. It would seem likely that Joseph and Mary thought of Bethlehem as the right place to bring up the Child they knew would be the Messiah, and thus there is nothing improbable in their returning there after presenting Him in the temple.

The Wise Men came "from the east". This is rather indefinite and we do not know which was their country. Glover's commentary reports that the Si-Ngan tablet speaks of them as Persians. This tablet is the oldest Christian monument in Asia. Early missionaries went right across Asia to

χρὸς Ἀνατολῶν = Persia?

ἐν τῇ Ἀνατολῇ = Babylonia & Assyria?

China, and for some time there was a very numerous church in Central Asia. Eventually this church was wiped out, but when modern missionaries penetrated China they were astonished to come across evidence of this earlier church in China. Among this evidence is this stone monument which speaks of the Wise Men as coming from Persia. Of course we cannot say that because we find an old inscription in China speaking about the Wise Men what it says must be accepted. But in this case it fits in with the probabilities. ✓ Persia is in the right direction. The religion of the Persians was far purer than that of many, so it would not greatly surprise us to find earnest, upright men coming from that land. We cannot be sure, of course, but this suggestion seems as good as any. It is not without its interest that we find this story of the visit of Gentiles to the Infant Jesus in the First Gospel which is written so much from the Jewish standpoint. We would have expected it in the Third Gospel. By contrast it is Luke and not Matthew who tells of the observance of the Law in the offerings at the temple.

The Wise Men came to Jerusalem. We are not told why, but as their question was "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" Jerusalem was the natural place for them to go to. Where else would anyone expect to find the newly born King of a country than in the capital of the land? The Wise Men doubtless expected that the birth, which they had learned of far away in their own land, would be a matter of common knowledge in Judæa. It was only a matter of asking anyone and they would have the information. It is curious that men from a distant land should be interested in the King of the tiny and unimportant kingdom of Judæa. The evidence of the star had clearly convinced them of the importance of the new King, so that they thought of Him as being more than merely the King of a petty state.

The reason that they gave for their question runs, "for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him". The "star" may have been an unusual conjunction of planets, i.e. a rearrangement of the pattern of the known stars. Or it may be that the Wise Men had detected a star



previously unknown to them. If so, it may have been something whose appearance was temporary, like a comet, or even perhaps a meteorite, or again one of the "permanent" stars, which they had not previously known. The language gives us no clear guidance to enable us to choose between these possibilities.

According to our translation they saw the star "in the east". The Greek means "in the rising" and the question is "the rising of what?" The expression is sometimes used of the rising of the sun, and so comes to mean "the east". This is the justification for our translation, which may accordingly be right. But it is at least possible that it is the star's rising that is meant. The Wise Men may mean that they saw the star when first it appeared, and so are qualified to speak about it. The expression is not the same as that in verse 1 which speaks of the men as coming "from the east". Moreover, it is the appearing of the star ("his star") that shows that the King is born, not the direction in which it appeared. On the whole I should think that here they are referring to the rising of the star, and not to the quarter in which they saw it.

The purpose of their visit was "to worship him". This last word is sometimes used of paying homage to men, as well as of worshipping God, and both Rieu and Goodspeed here translate with the word "homage". I doubt whether this is justified. The primary idea of the verb is that of worship. But in ancient times in eastern lands kings were often held to be divine, and thus homage that was paid to them had the element of worship about it. It is from this that the propriety of applying the verb "worship" to their subjects' relations to them arises. But when we use the term "homage" we have lost these overtones and the word hardly says enough. It seems clear that the Wise Men recognized supernatural traits in the King whose star they had seen. Hence their desire to worship Him.

These Wise Men followed the leading that they had, and this makes them very important for all who take the Christian religion seriously. They did not, as far as we know, have the

advantage of having the Scriptures of the Old Testament before them. They were not members of the chosen people of the old covenant. They lived far from the land where God's mighty acts had been described and written down and meditated upon. They lacked the advantages enjoyed by many of their contemporaries in Judæa. But this they had that they followed as far as they were able the light that was given them. They had a certain understanding of the stars, and God spoke to them through this understanding. But they were not disobedient to the heavenly leading, and thus they came to see in due course the Saviour, the Son of God, come down from heaven.

God does not expect from us today that we should have the same deep knowledge of spiritual things as His prophets and apostles of old. He does not require of us profound spirituality or deep skills that are beyond us. But if we follow the light that we have, and are obedient to what we know of God's will for us, then like the Wise Men of old we, too, shall be brought to the Saviour.

*Herod's Inquiries (Matt. 2: 3-6)*

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. 5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judæa: for thus it is written by the prophet, 6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

The addition of the title "the king" to Herod's name gives the reason for his being troubled when he heard of the visit of the Wise Men. He felt that his position was endangered by Him to whom they bore their witness. He was by nature suspicious and tended to see potential rebels in all sorts of innocent people. The last days of his reign were clouded with violence for this reason. Herod was not a man to dismiss any rumour of a potential rival, especially when, as in

this case, it was supported by omens from the heavens. He was troubled at the possibilities that the news conjured up.

If Herod was troubled that was enough to make "all Jerusalem" troubled, too. The inhabitants of the city had learned all too well that Herod in such a mood might strike down anyone at all. There was no telling where the thing would end. In addition to this the particular news the Wise Men brought would have troubled many people. They knew Herod to be firmly in the saddle, and they knew him to be a fiercely determined man. A new King would mean rivalry, bloodshed, struggle, and perhaps much destruction in the city. While some would be cheered to think that Herod's reign was near its end, others would tremble at the trouble that would be the inevitable accompaniment of the ending of his regime.

Herod knew that his Jewish subjects were expecting the Messiah. He seems to have reasoned that the only king that could have been attested to the Wise Men would have been the Messiah. Thus the next step was to consult the religious people of the city and inquire of them whether they knew where the Messiah would be born. Herod knew that there were many prophecies about the Messiah, and there well might be one which gave information about His birthplace. So the King assembled "the chief priests and scribes of the people" and asked them "where Christ should be born". The word rendered "demanded" and which we might better translate "inquired" is in the continuous tense. Herod's question was not perfunctory. He was persistent.

It is an interesting sidelight on the current interest in everything to do with the Messiah that apparently without hesitation or consultation these men were able to answer. Not only did they give the name of the birthplace as Bethlehem, but they were able to quote a specific passage from the prophet Micah to prove their point (Mic. 5: 2).

If you look up the prophecy you will find that the form in which it is quoted differs in some respects from the original. In our last study we were seeing that there are various solutions to the problem of inaccurate quotations. All those we



there noted may apply here: the scribes may have quoted loosely from memory, or they may have been using a different manuscript when they learned the text from any that have survived, or there may be a different translation from the same text. In this case we must also add the possibility that the words were quoted not exactly but in order to combine the words of Scripture with the scribal interpretation of the passage. This may be meant not as the way the passage was originally written but as the way the scribes understood it.

The words from Micah in addition to giving Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah go on to speak of his functions as Ruler. He comes from a humble little town, but He is to be the Ruler over all the people of Israel. The scribes knew all this, they were ready in a moment with their text. But, when the Messiah came to them, as a class they rejected Him. They knew a good deal about Him, but He did not conform to their preconceived ideas, and they had nothing to do with Him. It is still quite possible for men to have quite a lot of religious knowledge, and yet for the root of the matter to be completely missing. These are days when the acquisition of knowledge is comparatively easy. We have means of getting at the truth that earlier generations could not have guessed at. It is all the more important that we come to see the necessity for acting on the knowledge that we have. There is a comforting feeling about having a grasp of the tenets of our particular denomination, about knowing exactly how a service should be conducted or a church run, about having a good grip on Biblical truth. But to have knowledge and to act in accordance with it are two different things. These scribes are a standing witness to the truth that knowledge, of itself, is not enough.

*Herod Sends the Wise Men on their Way (Matt. 2: 7, 8)*

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search diligently for the young

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child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

Herod had a secret session with the Wise Men. He did not wish his instructions to them to be widely known. He wanted to extract from them all the information he could. This last should not have been difficult when he was able to convey to them the information that they were seeking. Herod was a cunning man, and although he had no reason for thinking that the Wise Men would play him false, yet on general principles he would try to get as complete a command of the situation as possible. Then if things went wrong somewhere he would know better how to act. So he made close inquiry about the star and its appearing. The verb rendered "enquired diligently" has the meaning "acquire accurate information". It implies careful and thorough investigation. Herod was particularly interested in the time of the star's appearance.

It is quite in keeping with that monarch's usual wily methods that he should keep his real feelings on the appearance of the new King to himself. He urged the Wise Men to return to him in due course with exact news of the Baby's whereabouts in order that he might follow their example, and go to worship. There is no hint that they discerned anything of his motives. It took a divine vision later on to prevent them from returning to Herod.

### *The Wise Men Worship the Babe (Matt. 2: 9-12)*

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. 11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

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The following of the star is something of a difficulty. A star in the sky is so remote from earthly objects that it is difficult to see how it could either precede men or stand over any one particular locality.

It may be significant that this is the first time that we read of the star's going before them. Legend makes them follow the star all the way from their own country, but Matthew does not say anything about this. The impression that we get from the narrative is that they worked out from the appearance of the star that the "King of the Jews" had been born. They then reasoned that such a King would be found in the capital of the Jewish kingdom, so they set out for Jerusalem. Then they enquired of the King's whereabouts, and were directed through Herod to Bethlehem. There is nothing about following a star in all this. It may well be that in the heat of the pursuit of their inquiries they had not been thinking so very much of where the star was. Then, when they set out for Bethlehem, they may have seen it ahead of them, over the Bethlehem road. They took this to indicate that they were on the right road, and, indeed, that God was leading them by the star. When they came to Bethlehem the star may well have appeared to them over the very place where Mary and Joseph were.

On Christmas cards we so often see quaint little stars only a few feet up from earth. It is easy to see how such "stars" could lead people, which is possibly the very reason they turn up so regularly on such cards. There is no reason why God should not have sent such a phenomenon to lead these men, only it is not what we would naturally call a "star", and it does not seem as though this is what Matthew is trying to say.

The important things are that the men went to Bethlehem and came to the right place, and that the star somehow led them to their destination. They were overjoyed when they saw the star in these circumstances, as well they might be (cf. Knox, "They, when they saw the star, were glad beyond measure"). So they came to Bethlehem and came into the "house". If the Christ child was born in a stable, the holy



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family had by this time secured more normal accommodation. If His birthplace was the home of a very poor family they may well have remained in the same place. We do not know.

The Wise Men "fell down, and worshipped him". They gave full outward expression to the depth of their feelings toward the Babe. Then they presented Him with gifts. I always like to notice that the account says "when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts". So often when we present our gifts to the Christ we do not open up our treasures. We give to Him, not the things we value highly, but those that we can most easily afford, whether it be in terms of money, or time, or companionships, or our talents, or whatever it be. We give our second best. We still need to learn that the gifts that cost us nothing are worth precisely what they cost.

The gifts they gave were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The first mentioned is self-explanatory. Gold has always been valuable, and a most acceptable present to all men, whatever their station. Frankincense and myrrh would have been more valuable then than now. In the ancient world people made much greater use of unguents of various kinds than they do in these days. Frankincense and myrrh were rare and precious oils which were much in demand. Each of the gifts, then, is something of great value. The Wise Men did not stint in their giving. From early days the Church has delighted to interpret the gifts mystically. Gold is held to point to royalty, frankincense to divinity, and myrrh to mortality. These are beautiful fancies, and we can appreciate their relevance to the particular situation. They represent ideas that are true and important. But I very much doubt whether they point us to the reason for the choice of these gifts. That is rather their costly nature. The Wise Men gave the Christ Child of their very best.

The Wise Men returned to their country and thus pass out of our knowledge. They were "warned of God in a dream" as to their route home. It is not without its interest that the Scripture tells us of an angel who spoke to Mary direct, of an

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angel who spoke to Joseph in a dream, and of these same Wise Men discerning the leading of God in a star, and now of their finding the voice of God in a dream. There is no one way in which God makes His will known. Even in these cases of a number of more or less miraculous examples of guidance there is no stereotyped pattern. We come back to the point made earlier, that God guides all those who genuinely seek to know His will. He does not guide them all in the same way, but if anyone really wants to know the right way, and sincerely seeks the divine guidance, then it will be afforded in the mode that God sees best.

So the divine intervention caused these men to return home without seeing Herod. That monarch thought he would be able to impose his will on the situation. But, like many another, he was quite unable to affect the purposes of God. God has His own way of seeing that His will is done. And, however He chooses to work, puny men cannot prevent it.

### *The Flight into Egypt (Matt. 2: 13-15)*

13 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. 14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: 15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

This is the only account we have of the flight into Egypt, and some have felt that the story is unhistorical. When they suggest that it does not fit into the situation they are on dangerous ground. If the visit of the Wise Men is historical then the rest follows almost as the night the day. Herod is well known to us as one of the most cruel and bloodthirsty tyrants that ever lived. He was in many respects an able man, but he had very little respect for human life. More than once he had members of his own family executed as the result of his suspicions that they might possibly be rivals.

Even being the object of his affections was no guarantee of safety, for he had his favourite wife executed. He had his own sons executed, causing the Emperor Augustus to comment that it was better to be Herod's pig than his son. Especially towards the end of his reign he was gloomy and perpetually suspicious. Those in his immediate entourage must have felt that no one was safe. If then he heard that a new King was born nothing is more probable than that he would take every step within his power to see that He was destroyed. What follows in the rest of this chapter is quite in keeping with the tyrant's activities as we know them from elsewhere. And we cannot think that God would fail to protect the Christ whom He had sent into the world. Flight to Egypt was a fairly obvious course. The distance was not great, and Egypt was out of Herod's power. There was a very large colony of Jews in Egypt at that time. One might almost say that it was the natural place to which to go.

As before, Joseph received the divine message from an angel of the Lord in a dream. And, as before, he was not slow to obey. Why he went "by night" is not clear. It may be that we should understand that it was the same night in which Joseph received the vision. In this case the basic reason will be that of urgency. Joseph gathered that there was no time to lose. If the flight did not take place that same night we may hazard the conjecture that Joseph did not wish people to know where they were going. It would render pursuit difficult or even impossible.

Characteristically Matthew concludes this little section with an appeal to prophecy. He cites Hos. 11: 1 in a version which is not that of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Matthew often does this, and it looks as though he sometimes makes his own translation from the Hebrew. He may be doing this here.

In passing we may notice that there are some Jewish traditions that Jesus was in Egypt. Some of the early Jewish stories speak of Jesus as having performed certain miracles, and explain this by saying that He went to Egypt, and there learned magic tricks. We may smile at this as an explanation



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of the gospel stories, but at least these traditions witness to two things: Jesus did miracles, and Jesus had been in Egypt.

### *The Slaughter of the Children (Matt. 2: 16-18)*

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, 18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

Presently Herod appreciated the fact that the Wise Men were not going to return (Rieu translates, "Herod was extremely angry when he realized that the Wise Men had played him false!"). In his anger he determined to slay every child that would come within the age group that he fixed upon as a result of his inquiries of the Wise Men. He calculated that by killing every child in the little town two years old or younger he would make sure of slaying the newborn King. There would not have been a very large number who thus perished, but it is a gloomy story. As we noted earlier, it is quite in keeping with the character of Herod, but it is a repulsive story for all that.

Richard Glover has some helpful meditations on this incident. He reflects that "A throne is an opportunity of doing greater evil as well as greater good". Our immediate reaction to this story is to condemn Herod. It is far more fruitful to reflect on our own faults. We sometimes think that if we were not the unimportant people that we are, if we occupied high place, if we controlled great wealth, we would be able to do quite a lot of good in the world. Maybe we could. But whether we *would* is another matter. High place has often proved the occasion for great temptations. The man with great opportunities for good has also great opportunities for evil. As it stands the sins and mistakes that unimportant people make do not usually have far-reaching

consequences. If we were more important our sins might have greater effects. It is well that we remember our own faults, and use such a story as this one as the means of inciting us to repentance and a better use of whatever opportunities God has given us.

Glover also comments here "Age makes men worse if it does not make them better". Life does not stand still, and neither does moral development. If we are not better men than we were a year ago we are worse. The man I am today is the result of all my yesterdays.

*The Return to Nazareth (Matt. 2: 19-23)*

19 But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. 21 And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judæa in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: 23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

For the third time we read of an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream. On this occasion the angel directs him to return to "the land of Israel", for, "they are dead which sought the young child's life". There is no indication of time here, so that we have no means of estimating how long was spent in Egypt. Joseph obeyed the angel's command, and returned with Mary and the Babe.

The impression we get is that he intended to go back to Bethlehem. The chain of events which had caused Jesus to be born in that city after both Mary and Joseph had been told of His greatness would have convinced Joseph that Bethlehem was the right place to bring the Child up. If the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem that would seem the proper course. However, when Herod died his dominions



were divided among his sons, and Archelaus, the one who received Judæa, was probably nearest in spirit to his father of any of them. He lacked Herod's ability, but he possessed his cruelty and vindictiveness. When Joseph heard that this man ruled Judæa he was afraid to go to that region. His fears were confirmed by a further dream in which he heard God's warning. Consequently he took up his abode once more in Nazareth of Galilee.

Matthew says that this was done "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene". The difficulty here is that there is no passage in the Old Testament which says just these words. It may be that there is a significance in the manner of citation employed. This is not Matthew's usual formula which we see, for example, in verse 15. Again and again he cites passages with "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken . . . saying". On this occasion there is no "saying", and this may indicate that he is not giving the exact words of any particular passage but simply the general drift of the prophetic message. It is quite possible to translate the last section "because he shall be called a Nazarene" which would make the point clear. He went to Galilee to fulfil what is written in the prophets, and we see this in that He was a Nazarene, i.e. a citizen of an unimportant and despised town. Knox has a footnote, "An obscure village is often regarded by its more important neighbours as typical of an unfashionable or provincial outlook; cf. Jn. 1: 46. The prophecy (Is. 53: 3) that our Lord would be despised by men was fulfilled when His contemporaries spoke of Him scornfully as 'a prophet from Nazareth' (like our 'wise men of Gotham')". This would seem to be the point of Matthew's words. Our Lord was brought up in an unfashionable place, and bore shame because of this.

It is all part of the wonderful story that has occupied us through these studies. When God sent His Son He did not conform to men's ways. He disregarded human ideas of greatness and sent Him in great humility. In this concluding section, as throughout the whole story, we are reminded that



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God's ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts. He does bring to pass His good and perfect will, and in some ways in which we would never have anticipated. As we contemplate Bethlehem and all that it stands for we can but bow in adoring wonder, and worship.